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The Countess Pharamond.

(A SEQUEL TO "SHEBA.")

By "RITA,"

Author of "GRETCHEN," "THE LAIRD O' COCKPEN," "SHEBA," etc., etc.

Book V.

CHAPTER VI.

"CHECK!"

FLUTTERING like some gorgeous butterfly through the sunshine of her social successes, the Countess Pharamond was yet a prey to such fears and tortures as that gay world little imagined.

Her husband avoided her as much as possible, but her apparent liberty was fettered as much as that of any galley-slave of old. A glance from under his sullen brows, a coarse jest or insinuation, would make her turn cold and sick in the midst of a whirl of pleasure, or the adulation with which she was invariably greeted. She felt a vague dread of him, of what he knew or suspected, and she longed to escape his presence as a prisoner longs to escape from the bar of threatening justice.

He had not mentioned the name of Sheba Ormatroyd since the night she had been to their house, and his silence made Bessie suspicious. For her own part, she was glad enough to avoid the girl, for whom her jealous dislike daily increased.

Keenly as she had watched Amersley on the evening of their meeting, she had been unable to detect anything in his manner that gave her a clue to their present attitude towards each other. The scene in the conservatory had escaped her eyes, for she had left Sheba in the safe custody of Hélène de Valette, and had not observed her abrupt departure.

Feeling sure that Paul had tired of his infatuation, and armed with the superb vanity that the hypocrisy of her world delighted to foster, the countess began to show her hand more recklessly than she was quite aware of. Paul's cold courtesy and polite avoidance made her furious. She attributed it to his fear of scandal, or the suppressed enmity which she knew had always

existed between her husband and himself. With every day that she gave herself up to the indulgence of such thoughts their ascendancy grew more imperious.

Schemer, *poseuse*, woman of the world as she was, yet she lost her head completely over this wild fancy.

She would have been content to sacrifice anything and everything so that only Paul's love might be hers. And apart, and apparently unobservant, the count watched and laughed sardonically at her folly, and resolved in his evil mind that it should be the weapon of a revenge which he had sworn to take. At present it suited him to be silent and see nothing. This was an *entr'acte* to the drama playing itself before his eyes, and he heard of Amersley's departure and noted his wife's irritation and feverish spirits with a malicious enjoyment of a speedy *dénouement*.

He became quite good-humoured, and let himself be bored or beguiled by the Duchesse de Valette with a serenity that made her believe her old powers of ascendancy were still intact.

Sentiment had long disappeared from their friendship, but she had a jealous craving to be still of importance in his life, and the *confidante* of his actions and desires. She was quite ignorant really of his schemes, nor could she have believed him evil enough to carry them out, but then she had not suspected that feeling on his part for Sheba Ormatroyd. Even Bessie had given no hint of it, nor could the duchesse herself have credited him with a passion for any one so cold and unprepossessing. "A perfect type of the prude *mees anglaise*" she had pronounced her; no charm, no grace of manner. Could anything be in worse taste than to display indifference and disgust for society in the presence and under the patronage of that august body? Decidedly neither her talents nor success could atone for her unpleasant *brusquerie* and unfortunate truthfulness.

Lord Amersley had left town for some days before Bessie was aware of the fact. When she learnt it in the course of some frivolous gossip her heart grew bitter with a sudden spasm of anger. Had he done this to avoid her? Wounded vanity is as painful as any jealousy, and with all her ingenuity of reasoning she began to fear that after all he might not really care.

All the stimulus which his presence had given to her life seemed to die out in his absence. To have left her thus, with no

word, no sign, no effort at farewell, seemed at once a wrong and an insult. Outwardly she appeared indifferent, but conscience made a coward of her, and when she had to face Pharamond, or listen to his questions and remarks, she could not help some sign of self-betrayal.

To the Duchesse de Valette it was all very amusing. She hated London and English society, but this *petite comédie* playing for her in its midst was at once engrossing and absurd. She speculated as to what the characters would make of their parts, and meanwhile encouraged them by those half-truths and insidious flatteries which were at once incentive and approval of their performance.

"Bessie is foolish to show her hand so plainly," she thought, as she noted the restless spirits and flagging energies, and the look of worry and anxiety which every day of silence stamped on the fair face of the countess. "I wonder does she really care, or is it only the wish for what is denied that makes the attraction?"

She herself had long outlived illusions. She could weigh her own attractiveness with perfect justice, and gauge to a hairs-breadth the worth of the feelings she inspired. But Bessie was impulsive and vain. She could not believe that any man could really resist her *if she showed* him that she did not desire resistance. That she had met the wrong man for these tactics had not yet come home to her with absolute conviction, and she displayed her disappointment with lamentable indiscretion.

One afternoon, while driving in the Park, a sudden whim took possession of her: she would drive over to St. John's Wood and see Sheba. Perhaps she knew or had heard something through Noel Hill.

She gave the order to the coachman, and was soon at the gate of the bijou villa. Hearing Sheba was at home she directed the carriage to return for her in half an hour, and entered the house. Much to her disgust Dolly Levison was there, and she and her step-mother were distressingly effusive in their welcome and their appreciation of this condescension.

Bessie accepted some tea, and while Sheba was busied over its preparation she watched her with the keen and critical eyes of jealousy. Certainly she looked better. Her face had more

colour, and a quiet serenity had taken the place of its former expression of trouble and unrest.

Mrs. Levison was as trying as ever, Dolly as frivolous; but Sheba met the peevish reproaches of the one and the silliness of the other with a gentleness that she had never displayed before. But again Bessie assured herself that she was absolutely unbeautiful—plain, thin, commonplace. It was impossible Paul could admire her—care for her now. Her impatience to learn what she half guessed Sheba could tell her at last broke through the restraint of the others' presence.

"Have you heard from Noel Hill?" she asked. "He is at Heronsmere, is he not?"

"Yes," said Sheba, with a faint access of colour. "He left town nearly a week ago."

"And how long is he going to stay? I wonder he can tear himself away from you, my dear," Bessie said maliciously.

"So do I," interposed Mrs. Levison. "I am always telling Sheba it is not proper—at least I don't consider it so—to have an unmarried man dangling after her, clergyman or no clergyman. I suppose he has feelings. And I don't hold with friendships between people of opposite sex. One or other is sure to overstep the mark."

"Is he trying to convert you, Sheba?" asked Dolly flippantly. "My people think you are an atheist, you know."

"She is very nearly as bad," said her mother. "So much for book learning and philosophers, and such like people."

"What took him to Heronsmere?" asked Bessie sharply, determined to go straight to the point.

"His duties to Lord Dormer," said Sheba quietly.

"Does he tell you what sort of place it is?" persisted Bessie, as she sipped her tea in leisurely and indifferent fashion.

"Very beautiful . . . and with a magnificent library," answered the girl, marvelling a little at Bessie's sudden interest.

She determined not to mention Lord Amersley's name unless compelled to do so.

"It was very early in the season to leave town," persisted the countess. "Are there any visitors staying there?"

"Noel does not say so."

"You are very communicative I must say," said Bessie sharply. "One has to drag everything piecemeal from you."

"Why are you so interested in Noel Hill's movements?" asked Sheba calmly.

Their eyes met with a momentary challenge. The countess felt her face grow warm beneath that calm contemptuous gaze.

She laughed with some insolence.

"Oh, you need not be jealous. My curiosity was more on your account than on my own. He was so extremely devoted."

"Noel Hill has always been a very good and true friend to me," said Sheba coldly. "You might know that by this time, and not misinterpret a kindness which I at least know to be disinterested."

"Is there such a thing?" scoffed Bessie. "I never believed it, but you were always rather *tête exaltée*, my dear."

Then she turned to Mrs. Levison and retailed tit-bits of society scandal such as her soul loved to that lady—Dolly listening, eager, open-eyed, greedily, and pleasantly conscious of the *prestige* she would gain at Maida Vale by a repetition of it all.

Dolly had Levison as a curious mingling of race and epoch. She had the innate vulgarity and love of ostentation and pride of wealth that stamp the Semitic origin, and with them she combined the shallowness and impurity of thought, the mental and physical selfishness, the love of admiration and excitement, which are peculiarly the possession of the *femme du monde*. She adored Bessie as the representative of her own ideal of fashionable life, and never ceased to wonder at the change in her, and the contrast between her former insignificance and her present position. It was a source of terrible vexation that the countess was so coldly indifferent to her overtures of affection and her rapturous praises.

She longed above all things to have the *entrée* of the Countess Pharamond's house—to be asked to Paris, and bask in the brilliant, wicked, audacious society that she read of in her French novels.

She might have attained that ambition in London had she only known it, but she was possessed of an idea that the licence and frivolity which made such an adorable combination in the excitement of modern high life could only be obtained in the capital of modern vice.

As she chattered, and listened to, and flattered Bessie she was only engrossed by this one thought, and the astute countess was perfectly aware of the fact. But she disliked the forward, vulgar

little sycophant, and as there was nothing to be gained by "taking her up" she took scant pains to conceal that dislike.

Seeing that no further information was to be obtained from Sheba, and afraid of persisting in inquiries that might betray too deep an interest, the countess at last terminated her visit.

As she shook hands with Dolly that young lady gave her a meaning glance.

"Would you do me the great, great favour of taking me as far as Oxford Street?" she said. "I promised to meet Aunt Rachel at Marshall and Snelgrove's at half-past six." Then in a whisper she added, "I can tell you something you would like to know."

Bessie showed no sign of discomposure, though she wondered what the girl could mean.

"I shall be most happy," she said in her usual cold, negligent fashion, and, followed by the fluttering skirts and excited little figure, she swept through the tiny entrance hall and entered her carriage.

The beauty of the horses and the livery affected Dolly with her usual fervour of admiration, but Bessie cut her short abruptly.

"What did you mean?" she asked. "What have you to tell me that demanded so much mystery?"

Her pale turquoise-coloured eyes looked straight, and almost defiantly, at the pert malicious little face by her side. Dolly did not flinch; she had been watchful and observant, and had kept her ears well open ever since the night of that memorable dinner party.

"I thought you would like to know something about Sheba and Lord Amersley," she said. "Mamma told me as a secret . . . but if you would care to hear——"

Bessie's heart gave a quick throb, but she only looked straight before her at her coachman's wig, and her expression did not alter its cold and bored serenity.

"What was the secret?" she asked languidly. "Nothing of much importance, I imagine."

"Did you know," asked Dolly, suddenly sinking her voice, "that the night of your grand party, when we were with you and Sheba would not come, that Lord Amersley left your house and came to see her?"

Bessie gave a sudden start. The air around seemed to grow dark and misty. So it was for this he had left her in that dis-

courteous manner, with neither apology nor regret! Her dislike to Sheba assumed the sudden poignancy of hatred as the whole truth flashed before her eyes.

To be defeated—and by such a rival! The thought stung her to a very madness of jealousy.

"Well," she asked between her set teeth, "what of that? No doubt he wished to see her unknown to your mother. She would not receive him."

"They had a great scene," continued Dolly. "Sheba was very ill all next day, and she told mamma about the visit and that she had sent him away, and he would never come again. Mamma was furious. She said he had no right to come there, and he hasn't been since; but I think they write to one another. Mamma says he still cares . . . It seems so funny any one caring like that for Sheba. I think she is quite ugly—at least in comparison to you."

Bessie sat there, outwardly calm, listening to this chatter, but in her heart a fire was raging that burnt up the last faint atoms of self-respect.

Dimly, uncertainly, thoughts and projects began to form in her brain—thoughts that gave shape to long-hidden jealousy; projects that offered a way at last to rid herself of a dreaded rival.

Dolly stole a glance at her from time to time, wondering whether her conjectures were right—if after all she cared about the handsome earl. They were nearing Oxford Street when the countess at last spoke. Dolly had chattered herself tired, and was glancing from side to side, wondering whether people were noticing her, and eagerly desirous of Aunt Rachel's appearance so that her new glory might be triumphantly flaunted before her.

"Dolly," said her companion at last, in a low hard voice, "all this you have told me has a—a meaning you are too young to understand. Let me explain that Sheba is really very wrong and imprudent in her behaviour."

"I know—I know," said Dolly, nodding her fair tousled head with Minerva-like wisdom. "Do you think I can't see what is before my nose? *Pas si bête!* Of course she was a fool to run away with him that time—and then afterwards to come back because she found out he had a wife living. Me—I would have remained. What was the use of acting like that—unless, indeed, he sent her away because he was tired of her?"

"Hush!" said the countess. "You must not talk of such things; they are best hidden from the world, and we have never told Sheba's story to any one. But she should be guarded from further imprudence. It is not wise of her to see or write to Lord Amersley. Are you quite *sure* they correspond?"

"Quite. Mamma told me so to-day. Oh, here we are at Marshall's, and there—that is Aunt Rachel's carriage. It's not nearly so grand as yours, is it?"

"Never mind the carriage," said Bessie hurriedly. "I Well, I haven't time now to explain. Will you come and lunch with me to-morrow—by yourself, I mean? Will they let you?"

"I should think so, indeed!" exclaimed Dolly, with a toss of her fair head. "Let me! Of course. Thanks awfully, Bessie. I will be sure and come. Am I to tell mamma?"

"Oh, if you like. There is no need to make it a secret. Well, good-bye. Mind, I shall expect you at two o'clock. They needn't send; I will drive you home."

And Dolly, radiant and delighted, left the carriage, having gratified her ambition by displaying herself as an intimate friend of its owner to the wondering and curious eyes of Mrs. Matthew Levy.

Bessie meanwhile drove on through the sunny, crowded streets, heart and brain on fire with the desperation of jealous hatred.

"He can write to *her* and not to me. He could leave my house that night for—for her sake. I had fancied it might be because he would not meet Mrs. Levison. Oh, I cannot bear it! I *will* not. Dolly would be a willing tool, and a safe one. I know how to bribe her. She is such a vain little fool—and unscrupulous too. At least I will stop those letters—if wealth or will can do it!"

CHAPTER VII.

"STABBED IN THE DARK."

THE Countess Pharamond was no fool, and she had lived long enough in the world to know that she had embarked on a very dangerous enterprise.

It had seemed incredible that Paul should still care—that a girl like Sheba Ormatroyd possessed the power to keep such a man constant with so romantic and sorely-tried a constancy. Yet almost she began to credit it.

"I believe men will endure and suffer anything so long as it is not in the name of virtue," she thought impatiently.

For she had stripped off all the purer or more delicate meaning of this strange attachment, and to her it was nothing but what the world called such things, nor, to her thinking, did Sheba deserve any better title than the opprobrious epithet she had used in speaking of her to her husband.

It maddened her to think she should still love Paul, or that Paul cared for her sufficiently to avoid herself and be blind and deaf to every lure and hint and suggestion that she had not scrupled to put forth.

"If I cannot have his love, at least I will have vengeance!" she muttered to herself; and she grew *distracte* and absent, while the Duchesse de Valette and her husband exchanged meaning glances across the dinner table.

"You look troubled, *ma chère*. Has anything vexed you?" asked Pharamond with marital tenderness.

She started. She had quite forgotten the presence of others.

"My dressmaker has disappointed me," she said readily. "It is too provoking. I had counted upon this gown for to-night, and she writes to say her forewoman has met with an accident, and the work is all put back in consequence."

"Very inconsiderate of the forewoman," said Pharamond, smiling. "But surely you have enough marvels to select from. The *contretemps* is scarcely serious enough to warrant so gloomy a brow."

"There you speak with all a man's ignorance!" laughed Héléne de Valette. "No subject is so all-important to a woman as her toilette; and if it be a special one for a special occasion, why, no words can express the disappointment of its non-appearance."

"I saw you driving that little Levison girl this afternoon in Oxford Street," said Pharamond brusquely, and still looking at his wife. "Where on earth did you pick her up?"

"I was calling at the Levisons'," said Bessie coldly.

"*Ma foi!* that is a new caprice for you," he said with a laugh. "How is your friend? Plainly she does not trouble herself about such unworthy folk as we are."

"You know her prejudices and oddities," Bessie answered, colouring beneath his searching eyes, "so that need not surprise you."

"She did seem a very curious young lady," interposed Héléne de Valette. "Is she of the type of most English girls?"

"She is not English at all; she is Australian," said Pharamond. "Did you not find her clever and interesting, duchesse?"

"Clever? Well, she would scarcely speak. Interesting? Certainly not. And assuredly she is not what you would call *sympathétique*."

"My husband has always admired her genius," said Bessie sarcastically. "I have heard she possesses extraordinary gifts. It is a little difficult to believe, considering how averse she is to display them."

"What does that matter?" sneered Pharamond. "It is not what we *see* that is of importance, but what *is*."

"I think what we see is of very great importance," laughed the duchesse. "We cannot go burrowing under the surface like moles to discover what people are like. But I do not think your friend is easy to know. I gave her an invitation to Paris, but she scarcely thanked me. She is one of your dreamers—she does not know how to live. But young as she seemed, I thought there was something tragic about her—as if she had suffered. Is that so?"

Pharamond laughed his coarse laugh.

"Oh," he said, "she has her *petite histoire* like most of her sex."

The words were strange, and the duchesse noted his eyes as they rested for a moment on his wife's fair impassive face.

"But certainly there *is* something between those three," she thought to herself, as she took a *liqueur* from the footman. "I wish I could discover what. Maxime is foolish to have secrets from me, for if it be my wish to find out I shall do so."

During the whole of this visit to the Pharamonds she had felt that there was a threatening of storm—an undercurrent of disturbance beneath the apparently smooth surface of their daily lives. But Bessie had evidently determined to keep her own counsel, and to Pharamond she dared not hint her suspicions.

She chatted on now with the vivacity and brightness she could so well assume, skilfully directing the conversation into new channels, and winning golden opinions from her host for a tact he could better appreciate than adopt.

He was daily growing more surly and morose—more suspicious and exacting. His health was not good. London did not agree with him, and he detested it; but still he lingered on—irritated by Sheba's resistance and Amersley's blindness and his wife's folly.

He was in the mood to speak out his mind of them all, but some slight restraint of prudence still kept him silent, and convinced him that his vengeance would ripen all the more surely by waiting. It would have astonished Sheba Ormatroyd had she known how bitter an enemy he had become—with what malicious delight he dropped hints and suspicions as to her past life and her wisdom in sacrificing a colonial reputation. Since she would not let him be her friend she should know how bitter a foe he could become, and he smiled cruelly and with inward joy as he thought how easy it would be to blast her reputation and stop up the channels of her newly acquired popularity.

Had he known of the dispute with Mixson and Co., and the penalty it entailed, his schemes would have been easier. As it was, accident was playing the part of fatality, and assisting him without his being conscious of the fact.

"I will bend her pride to the dust," he told himself again and again, brooding with lowered brows over his base schemes. "When she is without fame—without friends—and *poor* . . . who knows?"

For none knew better than himself how helpless a woman is when the world turns its back upon her. And one success means so little after all—if judiciously managed.

This girl might be brave, honest, sanguine as she chose—but against secret foes and cruel tongues what could she do?

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the enemies she had made, Sheba lived and worked, and thought out those problems which for her possessed so deep and unending an interest. She deemed it quite possible to live her life without the world and without friends. She was strong and trustful, but also she was unwise. She shrank from society because she knew society would have scoffed at her innocence, and been absolutely incredulous of a feeling that made her reluctant to meet the lover who was all the world to her.

She could not explain. She could only keep silence and wait. Solitude had never possessed any terrors for her. Now it was sweeter than ever because of the tender and unfailing remembrance that love gave. She had not absolutely forbidden Paul to write, and he had gradually began to do so. Those letters were the joy and delight of her life now, and robbed even her mother's tongue of its sting and the poverty and difficulties of daily existence of their hardship.

It was a life hard and self-denying enough. Surely no one need have grudged it the little happiness it craved. Yet there were hearts cruel and treacherous enough to do this—and more. Hearts that could plot and scheme for further misery and further shame than had yet been her portion—hearts pitiless and unmerciful—the heart of a man she had scorned and a woman she had rivalled.

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Dolly Levison came to luncheon at the appointed time, radiant as to costume, and in the highest spirits. She did not lunch every day with a duchesse and a countess !

To the former she was a perfect revelation. Her supreme content with herself, her vanity and complacency, the secondhand knowledge of French life and manners on which she prided herself, her banal chatter, and foolish ecstasies over fashionable trifles—all these afforded Madame de Valette intense amusement.

When luncheon was over Bessie took her to her dressing-room under the pretence of showing her some new jewels with which the count had presented her.

The delight of examining and exploring the treasures of the great ebony and silver case put Dolly into an almost religious fervour of adoration.

Bessie seated herself on a low chair, and allowed her young guest to handle and rhapsodize over these divine objects at her leisure. She was thinking how best to approach the subject of which her mind was full.

Dolly had clasped a sapphire and diamond bracelet on her plump white wrist, and was surveying it with rapture.

"It suits you admirably," said the countess ; "you may keep it if you wish as a *souvenir*."

"Oh, do you really mean it ?" cried Dolly ecstatically. "How generous—how good ! But it is too lovely . . . I feel as if ——"

"Don't trouble about your feelings," said Bessie sarcastically. "Accept it, if it pleases you better, as a remembrance of some slight service I may require at your hands."

"You may command me in any way, dearest countess," cried the girl, who sometimes bestowed Bessie's title upon her for the sheer delight of saying such delicious words. "You know I could not refuse you anything."

She kissed her rapturously in thanks for the jewels which sparkled and glittered so seductively on her arm.

Bessie smiled, her cold slighting smile. Were all women alike? she thought.

Would Gretchen ever have been betrayed if Faust had not sent her a casket of diamonds?

"And now, what is it you wish me to do?" asked Dolly, pirouetting and strutting before the mirror, and surveying her new treasure from all points of view.

The countess was thoughtfully replacing the contents of the case in their various trays. She noticed the covetous reluctant gaze that followed her actions.

"It is only a trifle," she said, lifting a string of pearls from its case, and absently twining it round her fingers. "But you must promise strict secrecy."

"Certainly. I won't breathe a word to any one."

She put her pert little head on one side. "Is it anything about Sheba?" she asked.

"Yes," said the countess. Then after a moment's hesitation she added, with a frankness that might have deceived any one less astute than the little Jewess, "I am afraid, Dolly, she is very imprudent. And she is so odd, so cold, so distrustful even of her best friends."

Dolly grinned, showing all her small white teeth like a malicious little monkey. "Yes," she said, "we know all that, Bessie. What is the 'imprudence' at present?"

"Do you remember what you said to me yesterday," asked Bessie, "about her corresponding with Paul—with Lord Amersley?"

"Yes, of course I do. I thought you did not like it at the time."

The countess felt herself redden at this coarse frankness, but she answered quite good-humouredly. "You are right, dear; I do not like it, but solely on her account. After what has passed she cannot be too careful . . . and it is the duty of her friends to see that she is so."

"Oh, I see," said Dolly, nodding her flaxen head; "and—as her friends—what are we going to do?"

The countess's turquoise coloured eyes took in with one rapid glance the expression of the pert sharp little face.

"You go there very often, do you not?" she said.

Dolly gave an affirmative nod. She wished Bessie would come to the point. What was she afraid of?

"Would it be possible for you to manage that . . . certain letters did not reach her?" asked the countess at last.

Dolly shrugged her shoulders and looked somewhat doubtful.

"Possible? Well, yes—but not easy," she said. Then her eyes fell on her bracelet.

"I will do my best," she said eagerly. "You know I'm very fond of you, Bessie, and I've had a long grudge against Sheba."

"I am sure you are clever enough to do anything you wish to do," said Bessie, lifting another tray of jewels so that their lustre and beauty were fully revealed. "And this is not merely a service to me, but a benefit to Sheba herself. Only harm can come of her imprudence. It is impossible for Lord Amersley to marry her."

"I hope he never will be able to do that," exclaimed Dolly enviously. "She *would* crow over us then! Fancy being Countess of Amersley, with a real castle to live in, and ever so many beautiful places of her own. It would be too aggravating."

Bessie smiled meaningly. "It can be prevented," she said, "and I am sure Lord Amersley would be only too grateful for the release. Now, about the means?"

"I think I can manage," said Dolly. "It won't do to tell mamma; she is such a blab. She can't keep anything to herself. She tells Aunt Rachel everything about Sheba, and her household affairs, and goodness knows what! But the servant, Mary, she'd do anything for money. I know that, because she wants to get married, and she is saving up—she told me so. Her young man is a soldier, and he generally borrows her wages. She lends them to him because if she doesn't he threatens to walk out with the cook who lives next door. He told Mary that she would willingly pay him half-a-crown to walk for two hours with her on a Sunday."

"That is not to the point," said Bessie sharply, feeling less interest in the *comédie humaine* of domestic life than became a student of Balzac. "Will you be able to secure this girl? . . . Promise anything—a sovereign a letter if you wish—and bring them to me unopened."

"A sovereign!" almost screamed Dolly, the instinct of heredity coming promptly to the fore at such a useless waste of profitable resources. "My dear Bessie, she would sell her soul to you for half that! Promise five shillings a letter, and we shall have what we want."

"No, no!" said Bessie hurriedly. "Let the girl be well recompensed. I will give her half-a-sovereign—and let her keep a silent tongue in her head."

With all her faults she could not be guilty of meanness, and there seemed something contemptible in so small a bribe for so laudable a purpose.

"It shall be done," said Dolly, with a little gleeful laugh. "If you will be extravagant I can't help it. I could have saved you half the money. I will go there this afternoon if you like. I can settle with Mary in five minutes."

"For goodness' sake be careful," said Bessie hurriedly. "A little imprudence will spoil all. How will the girl recognize Amersley's letters?"

"By his crest, I suppose. Surely if he's an earl he will use crested note paper. I'm almost sure of it, because I saw an envelope lying on Sheba's writing-table, and she got so red when I asked her whose crest it was. There was a coronet and a motto, I think. Oh, you trust me, Bessie; I'll manage it all. It will be rare fun!"

Rare fun! The Countess Pharamond shut her jewel-case with a sharp snap.

It was an age of prose, and hearts did not break nor lives suffer long for anything so foolish as romance. Surely it was time that old folly was dead . . . In the natural course of things it must die. She did but anticipate time and hasten events. Fate works with those who know how to strike.

Rare fun! It was certainly a drop from heroics to bathos to conceal the dagger of hatred under the apron of a serving-maid; but then one cannot always select special means for an end.

She sat there long after Dolly had left—her brow dark, her eyes kindling with the promised sweetness of revenge.

It solaced her in some degree. It compensated for much wounded pride and shattered self-esteem. Silence between two hearts that love has been so often the groundwork of a life's tragedy.

First silence—then misunderstanding—then estrangement, coldness, doubt. Yet it was all so old, and the means she was using were so contemptible, and had been used so often.

Books, plays, farces, dramas—how many hinged entirely upon intercepted letters and bribed underlings, who sold conscience and honour for gold!

To Dolly Levison it only seemed a jest to which her natural maliciousness and her long dislike of Sheba Ormatroyd gave a barbed sharpness; but to the Countess Pharamond herself it looked for a brief humiliating moment the thing it was—a shameful and dishonourable deed, base as a stab in the dark.

She thrust the feeling aside, and rose and went to face her world with a smile in her eyes—a lie on her lips. She had killed all compunction out of her heart. For sooner shall brass melt or stones cry out than a jealous woman have pity!

Book VI.

CHAPTER I.

HERONSMERE.

"A PLACE in which to dream one's life away!" had been Paul's first expression as he surveyed the beautiful old mansion—embowered in woods and situated in one of the loveliest of English counties—which bore the name of Heronsmere, and had been in the possession of his family for nearly two centuries.

As day followed day and he grew more at home with his surroundings—the quaint old gardens, the lovely sheltered woods that stretched away to the sea-shore, the yew-shaded terraces with their high stiff rows of box, the beautiful old house with its oak-panelled rooms and carved ceilings and dim mediæval tints—he felt that that first impression was almost as alluring as it was correct.

It was a place for dreams, for rest—for the scholar and the poet more than for the man of the world. The very atmosphere breathed peace, and seemed to soothe away all memories of the fever and unrest that lay in the life beyond its sylvan boundaries.

The more studious and philosophical members of the Amersley family had always loved it, and the fruit of their scholarly lives was to be found in the dim old library, with its casements of

stained glass and stored oak book-cases that reached from floor to ceiling, guarding with jealous care the garnered treasures of great lives and great thoughts.

There was something almost cloisteral about Heronsmere and its surroundings. The narrow lancet windows, the rich subdued colours of the decorations, the grave old-world grace of its rooms seemed to set them apart from all the glitter and noise of fashionable life; and within their walls society would have seemed as meretricious and unseemly as modern plate-glass beside the rich-hued tones of a cathedral window.

"For the first time I do not regret being an earl," said Amersley to his little son, as they paced the smooth turf of the terrace in the morning sunlight. "If I could have made my life here ——"

He paused abruptly. Always that little stab of memory; yet would he have foregone its passion and its pain for this monastic peace?

"I think it must be the most beautiful place in the world," said the boy, his eyes wandering over the vast expanse of hill and dale, and stream and pasture, of church spire and village, and shady meadow-ways, and further on to where the rolling waters of the wide blue sea were rippled by the southern wind.

His father smiled at the enthusiastic exaggeration. "That is high praise indeed, Paul; but it is very, very beautiful."

He thought involuntarily how Sheba would love it—how its dreamy peace and old-world grace and colour would suit her simple, studious tastes. Alas! alas! would it ever be that she should stand here by his side—its mistress and its queen?

"Is Müller really coming?" asked Paul presently.

"Yes, he will be here to-day. I think he will like Heronsmere, Paul."

"No one could help liking it," said the boy. "I wish we could live here always."

"Perhaps you would tire of it if you did," said his father. "But"—and he looked round with a sigh—"it is the first place I have seen that makes me feel what an English *home* might be."

He had indeed experienced that feeling most strongly, and in experiencing it recognized how one woman's presence could have sanctified and ennobled it.

Alone, he would always feel that its suggestions, possibilities,

and idealizations were at an unattainable height. He had reached that age when manhood craves interests and associations that the world can never supply; when the wider range of feelings are narrowed into a channel of personal desires — desires less passionate than loving, but for which there is no better word than "sympathy;" for without the sympathy passion would die and love grow slight and feeble. So it was that in feeling he had at last a "home" he knew that that home would be for ever incomplete unless the woman he called "wife" should be there set in honour as its mistress.

He was awaiting Müller's arrival with extreme impatience. They had not met since those days in the Austrian Tyrol; but he had corresponded constantly with the old philosopher and long ago given him the welcome news of Sheba Ormatroyd's safety.

Müller had recognized the girl's right to decide for herself as to the future. It was what he would have expected, and he thought Paul's complaints selfish and irrational.

True, their love was no fleeting fancy—it had been sorely tried and sorely proved; but all that went for nothing when viewed in the sight of the laws men make—the laws that had denied him freedom and held him bound in fetters of shame to a vicious and soulless inebriate.

"It is very hard for both—cruelly hard for her," thought the old German, as the train bore him through the fair, sweet English country. "One thinks of wedded boors trudging contentedly side by side through the dull sameness of years to whom such things as these never happen—whom it would not concern or trouble for one hour if they *did* happen: natures to be consoled by beer, and beans and bacon—I believe that is the good British labourer's fare—and then contrast them with the fate that has befallen my poor Paul. But what then? Do I not know—have I not preached it again and over again—'Every life its own burden—its own end.'"

But there was no irony and no philosophy in his greeting when the train dropped him at the little station and he saw Amersley waiting for him on the platform.

The weary haggard features told their own tale of suffering and anxiety only too plainly, even when lighted by the joy of welcoming his old friend.

It was not possible to say much till Müller had collected his

belongings, which, truth to say, consisted more of erudite and musty volumes than the usual traveller's *impedimenta*.

"What did you bring books for?" asked Amersley. "I told you my library contained almost every work of note or worth that you could name."

Müller shook his head faithlessly. "Ah, my Paul, I have heard that before; and then, just the one book one desires—it is not to be found."

"Well, you will see for yourself," said his friend, as he assisted him to mount the dog-cart. "I am going to drive you," he added; "your luggage will follow."

The old man looked somewhat anxiously at the snorting, restless horses; but he soon found that they were in capable hands.

"This is a beautiful country, Paul," he said. "And the house—it pleases you, *nicht wahr?*"

"I should be very hard to please if it did not," answered Amersley.

"Where is *der Junger?* I thought he would come with thee, Paul. I long to see him once more."

"I did not bring him. I wanted a private talk with you, Müller, and he . . . well, he is no longer a child. He understands and thinks too much, I often fancy, for he is not strong."

"You make yourself too anxious for him, *mein Lieber*," said Müller quietly. "He will grow strong and well now in this fine pure air of yours. What about his studies? You keep him with you still?"

"He has a tutor," said Amersley.

Then he looked at Müller's grave face and laughed. "Fancy to thyself, *mein Freund*, I have engaged an English clergyman to teach him—one of thy natural enemies."

"*Potsblitz!* What mean you, Paul? A priest—and in *thy* house, and training thy son. What then has come to thee?"

"When you see him," said Amersley, still smiling, "I think even your *animus* will be appeased. Besides, he is an old friend, in a way. You remember Noel Hill, of whom Sheba used to speak? He was her teacher."

The old man's brow cleared. "Oh, *natürlich!* So that is the reason. And how does it work?"

"Paul takes very kindly to the teaching. Hill is a fine manly fellow, Müller, and with more common sense and honest principle

than you could credit one of the cloth with possessing. He puts things before one so clearly, so reasonably, so——"

"*Bewähre !*" growled Müller. "I see how it is with thee, Paul. Philosophy was not proof against the subtlety of priestcraft."

"Not so, I assure you," disclaimed Amersley with eagerness. "We scarcely ever touch upon religious subjects. But I often think," he added thoughtfully, "that I have muddled and mystified my brain with Kant, and Strauss, and Schopenhauer—and that the simple philosophy is also the wisest."

"You are in a bad way, *mein Lieber*," growled the old German, "or maybe it is that much sorrow has weakened the intellectual faculties——"

"And shown that I am but human after all—eh, old friend? That is perhaps more to the point. I am very unhappy, Müller."

"I know that—your letters showed it. But surely since she is alive and well, and you have seen her, that should make life better and more hopeful for you, Paul?"

Amersley shook his head. "It ought to, I suppose. But nature is perverse, and it is hard to be put in leading-strings when one has once been free. These tantalizing glimpses of present happiness do but bring back more painfully the old memories and the old days. It is easy to say, 'Be calm; be rational,' but not easy to *be* it. I love her better than ever—better than myself—else indeed I should scarce have strength to fight against my own desires."

"And what of hers?" asked Müller gravely.

"Yes, I know. I owe her respect and obedience, and I have promised it shall be as she wishes. Once I allowed my own feelings to blind me to what was right. I have suffered enough for that, Heaven knows . . . Yet, oh, Müller, to see her again—as if the grave had given her back—and then have to let the cold empty silence fall once more between us."

"That was her wish, then?" asked Müller.

"Yes. I write to her, but not often, and she rarely replies. Poor girl . . . if you could see her, Müller, it would wring your heart. Such a miserable, sordid, lonely life—and that mother——"

The pause was eloquent of what was impossible to description.

"One would be very careful in the selection of parents did one know how materially they affect one's career in life," said Müller. "Pity that birth should be so cruel a penalty! But what of her work?" he added abruptly. "You wrote she was successful—almost famous. Does that not content her—even with an uncongenial home?"

Paul shook his head.

"You would not think so if you saw her. Mrs. Levison tyrannizes over her every action, and scoffs at the idea of her possessing any talent. Friends she has none, and society she avoids. Oh, Müller, it may sound wrong to say it, but I feel I could make life for her so happy, so different . . . It is torture to think of my helplessness—of the wasted years—the misery we both endure."

"What of the—barrier?" asked Müller suddenly. "She is content to remain there . . . she does not claim her position?"

"No. Perhaps she is afraid of my taking proceedings here. I swore I would do so if she set foot in England. The law cannot make me accept her as mistress of my home. I defy it—and her."

"Do you never hear anything?"

"My solicitor in Sydney watches on my behalf. She is leading a fairly decent life so far as we can ascertain . . . and so far as a drunkard's life can be decent. When the moral instincts are deadened as hers are deadened, one cannot expect much reform."

"You have not thought to try the case again? Surely you could secure the highest legal talent now."

"No doubt; but we should split on the same rock as before. Legally, we are both guilty of the same fault, and yet, how wide the difference between the nature of that fault!"

"And the natures of the two women! Yet one maintains her rights—the other has lost them by a piece of sublime folly. Paul, we have much on our conscience—we have done that girl a deep and bitter wrong. If I had left her mind alone . . . if you had not won her heart——"

"If . . . if!" cried Paul impatiently. "Can you with all your philosophies only repeat that parrot phrase of useless regrets? If one could go back, one day, one hour, one moment almost, oh, the difference it would make! But unfortunately we only

learn what the difference would have been when it is impossible to reclaim the day, or hour, or moment."

Then they both relapsed into silence. The peace and calm of the summer evening was all about them. The lovely green country breathed restfulness and beauty. The eyes of the old man, tired with poring over crabbed lore and erudite philosophies, drank in that beauty with quiet thankfulness. But the owner of it all scarce noted the loveliness, or valued the peace.

Nature's children are seldom grateful for her gifts unless their hearts are in tune with herself.

Müller was as delighted with the beautiful old mansion and its surroundings as Amersley could have desired. He was equally astonished and delighted at the change in Paul, which had transformed the pale old-fashioned child into a graceful aristocratic lad with all his father's personal beauty and artistic tastes.

The inspection of the library, which took place after dinner, still further heightened the spell of this beautiful and costly place. Here the fastidious instincts of the man of letters at once recognized the merit of patient labour which had accumulated these treasures through years of past study and unwearied research.

English, French and German literature—the best Italian poets, old Spanish romances, contributions in all languages on philosophy and theology, the best classics and the cream of modern thought, here found welcome and honoured place. If the collection was something of a medley, it was at least a medley of which any collector might have been proud.

It was in the library that Müller first met Noel Hill. He had excused himself from dining with them, as he often did—his simple tastes being more often disturbed than pleased by the lavish waste of food and elaborate courses which Paul laughingly declared were another "penalty of position."

Müller surveyed the pale studious face and thoughtful eyes with a penetrating and critical scrutiny.

He did not say much, being occupied in examining the treasures before him. It was strange that his first thought had been almost identical with Noel Hill's. "How Sheba Ormatroyd would revel in such a literary banquet as was here provided!"

He was peering among some ancient vilely printed German volumes when a remark from Noel to Amersley arrested his attention.

"It is said the mission of books is to help one to remember how much the world's great events owe to the intellect of men.

He turned sharply round.

"Do you mean decisive events—practical work?" he asked.

"Yes. The government of mind over matter. We are too much accustomed to look upon scholars as dreamers. We forget how largely they have influenced the past—and how momentous that influence still is in the practical life of the present."

"Modern rulers would tell you that the world has gained more from its armies and its governments than from its philosophers," said Müller curtly. "The thinkers are always in the minority."

"Yes, but their influence is not. The history of any great mind and soul must represent an epoch. The victory of a theory or a truth lives longer and is of more incontestable worth than any victory of brute force. It is only the savage or the tyrant who would now declare that 'might was right.'"

"I think many would be found to declare *that*, even in this so highly civilized land," said Müller. "And assuredly, whatever practical influence the scholar has on others, he is generally of the most impractical himself."

"Take as an illustration yourself, as I found you in your Heidelberg rooms," laughed Amersley, striking into the conversation.

"I was very happy. I no longer can take an active part in life, so I have to content myself with the dreams and thoughts of others. . . . You, *mein Herr*," he added, looking at Noel—"you no doubt work and think for a definite object—is it not?"

"No," said the young clergyman rather sadly, "I have nothing very definite before me. I am not orthodox enough to go with my brethren in everything they require, nor unorthodox enough to take up new ground for myself."

"Orthodoxy has spoilt many a great life," said Müller. "It is death to freedom of thought. What use would sight be if a man allowed another man to place a bandage over his eyes and say, 'Follow me; I will guide you safely.' We cannot all think alike. There can be no hard and fast rule for mental equality, for there is no escape from individual character. It is the spiritual essence which makes man what he *is*, and with which no material force has anything to do. As for an orthodox religion"—He paused, his eyes kindling with the old fire—"that is for you and

whom you call your brethren, *nicht wahr?* A something arranged by man for the spiritual subjection of men—a special theology kept up by the aid of past superstitions—an apology for a Deity you cannot comprehend and so pretend is not to be comprehended—a scheme of salvation which you have decreed *must* be miraculous because if left in its unfettered state it would be too simple for bishops and cardinals to expound.”

“Now you have started on your hobby, Müller,” interposed Amersley. “Poor Hill! Don’t pour out all your vials of wrath on him. I assure you he does not deserve it.”

“Oh, I am not afraid,” smiled Noel. “I agree with a great deal that Herr Müller says, but if I am to regard it as an indictment against all humanity, I must ask him what is to become of that section who *need* to be led—who are too weak to stand alone and too ignorant to lead others? Surely he would not deny them a guide or an instructor. His own argument implies mental inequality.”

“The fools and the weak would get on well enough if they were left alone,” said the old German. “It is that incessant calling ‘To here! to there!’ of creeds and sects that confuses them. Weak minds may need guidance, but they need toleration more. Your priests, to my thinking, insult the very name you pretend to reverence by persisting in doing God’s work *for Him*. Believe me He has placed a torch of truth in the hand of every man to whom He has given life. Some lights are bright, some feeble, some burn but a brief while; but the light has been there. It has not waited for man to kindle it, nor does it need his aid to illuminate the soul.”

“I am afraid I have neither learning nor experience enough to argue with you yet,” said Noel gravely. “You see I have been, in a manner, compelled to look upon this subject from one point of view—that of the orthodox teaching of the Church, and——”

For a moment something pained and bewildered came into the worn young face and uplifted eyes. He paused abruptly, yet that look filled the heart of the old German with keen compunction. Had he not already wrecked one innocent soul? Had he not vowed that never again should his teaching or his influence harm another, and yet he had forgotten that vow and lost patience so quickly!

“Keep to it—your Church, your faiths,” he cried with sudden re-

morse. "I do but talk ; I am old and foolish. You may be right—who knows ? I would not deprive you of the comfort or the peace your belief gives you, only be not vexed that it is not my faith, or that where you gain peace I have but found disturbance."

He turned abruptly away and began examining the shelves. Was it only age that had dimmed his sight and turned the costly bindings and rare titles into a blurred and confused mass ? and yet through the haze and mist he seemed to see a sad young face looking back to his own, and the tender pathos of a girl's voice came faint and broken to his ear—"I realize the truth of your words, but they do not comfort me."

He had robbed her of hope and comfort and left her but the broken reed of man's love, and the cold truth of man's philosophy. Surely that was harm enough for one life to bestow on another. Perhaps she cursed the day when fate had led her to his door.

CHAPTER II.

MIRAGE.

QUIETLY and uneventfully life flowed on for this strange trio. A studious tranquil life with a charm entirely its own—the charm of mutual sympathy and interest.

Amersley found much to occupy his time in matters concerning his estate. There were alterations to make, grievances to be redressed, the personal wants and benefits of the tenantry to claim attention ; and in all these duties he made Paul concern himself in some degree. Wherever he went the boy went also, and before long he was a universal favourite.

The life took him out of himself in a measure and made him less absorbed and old-fashioned, gave him natural and human interests, and even usurped for a time his devotion to book-lore.

Amersley was well content that it should be so. He preferred to have his son running races with village boys, or interested in a cricket match, or learning to ride across country, than poring over books. He wanted to see him the possessor of physical strength and energy. The love for learning was there and time would perfect it under judicious tutelage ; but he knew that there would be no second boyhood for him and desired above all that that time should be as honestly healthy and happy as it could be made.

In this Noel Hill seconded both his opinions and efforts, and

the result was that swimming and boating and exercise and open-air life did wonders for the lad. His spirits grew more buoyant, his frame more robust. It delighted his father to hear his light step and ringing laugh echoing through the quaint old house. It delighted him still more to hear the golden opinions he won from all who knew him.

Since the earl had personally interested himself in matters connected with his estates and responsibilities, he keenly recognized what power for good or evil lay in that much-abused word "landlord." The future of his son became of paramount importance in his eyes, and he felt he had never done a wiser thing than to place the boy under the care and tutelage of Noel Hill.

Carefully and observantly he watched the young clergyman, yet without ever seeming to do so ; and he could not but admire the patience and strength, the unselfishness and unobtrusive spiritual beauty of his character.

Here was no blatant profession, no cant or bluster, only a simple life of goodness believing in good and striving to fulfil its highest ideals. He thought of his own rebellion against human upholders of creeds, of his long belief in the errors and superstitions that had been christened as the one sure faith of the Christian Church, of his anguished perplexity as he had striven to disentangle the problems it presented, of the feuds and violence and hairsplitting that had degraded its name and disgusted its followers, and then he saw before him one simple purely-lived life, affected and guided only by that ideal of a Redeemer of mankind, and seeing, paused and pondered, and confessed, "How far nobler and greater than myself !"

It was impossible to watch such a life and believe it grounded in delusion ; impossible to see its tender charity, its unsparing service for the good of others, its ministry by the sick and dying, its effect on the mind and character of his own child, and yet say, "It proves nothing."

For gradually and surely it was proving a great deal, and proving it far more effectually than the host of tumultuous ideas and bewildering philosophies and complicated theories which had been used to overthrow the "fairly tale of Christianity."

A new ardour for spiritual investigation awoke within him, and one humbler and less combative than of old.

As the months glided peacefully by, Noel Hill found he

had gained another pupil, and Müller discovered he had lost another disciple. He said little; he too watched and wondered and admired. Life seemed to have brought a restful pause to these three widely different characters, and each recognized the good in the other with ungrudging admiration.

There is always a wide gulf, deep, silent, unbridgable, between human souls in a crisis of spiritual anguish. Alone must that crisis be met when it comes. Not the nearest or best beloved can stand by our sides or help us in that supreme moment.

Yet it seemed strange to Amersley that while he opened out his very soul to Sheba in his letters, she should remain silent and unresponsive. They were not letters that she should have ignored, not letters that laid claim upon her love, or dwelt upon it save with that passing touch of intense tenderness that is in itself a caress of memory. Yet never in his life had he so longed for her sympathy, or so passionately desired an equal return of confidence as in this time of spiritual and mental difficulty.

But she made no sign—gave no heed.

The beautiful peaceful summer-time sped on, and already the harvest was ripening and the tints of autumn colouring the foliage, and still the master of Heronsmere lingered on in what the world called contemptuously his "Hermitage," occupied, engrossed, yet sad at heart, though he gave no sign of his suffering.

"I will write to you sometimes," she had said. "As for yourself, tell me all you do, think, feel. My heart and sympathies must always be with you."

And he had done this. He had poured out his very soul to her. He had spoken as a man only speaks to that other self—that dear and sacred "life in life" which is entwined and involved in his own too closely for mental severance.

"She has borne it all—she will understand," he had said to himself. But if she understood she gave no sign.

It hurt him keenly, for it touched the roots of a spiritual pride that shrank instinctively from self-revelation. It forced him to think that she might despise, or pity, or condemn him, and disdained to say so. He knew her candour and love of truth so well that it seemed as if she kept silence because she feared to speak. He shrank painfully from her condemnation; yet had he not felt sure of being met half way he would not have spoken on the subject, momentous as it was.

At no time of his life had he been so sensitive of misjudgment. At no time had he felt such need of the tenderness and comprehension that a woman, and a loving woman, can alone bestow. Her seeming indifference to his need fell like the chill of a *douche* upon the passionate fervour of this present conflict. It had seemed so all-important. How was it possible she could disregard its pain, or its results?

Gradually out of the chaos of thought and the practical demands on time and patience which alone relieved it, the one real thing through all was that bitter consciousness of her indifference.

He could not speak of it to any one—pride sealed his lips even to Müller. He waited in silence to which there came no sign, catching at straws of explanation as they floated by on that current of "possibilities" at which love gazes so fatuously. All his philosophy forsook him, and he realized in himself only a fellowship of weakness with his kind—a shuddering dread of evil about to fall—a chill presentiment that fate had other and direr troubles in store for him than had yet been his portion.

In this mood he entered the breakfast-room at Heronsmere one morning and saw beside his plate that hated flimsy envelope with its formal direction and foreign stamp which he had learned to dread so much.

He took it up as if it had been some noxious thing and walked over to the window as he opened it.

The air was sweet and full of autumn scents. In the soft sun-flooded distance he could see the silver gleam of the river, the gold and crimson leafage, the reaped harvest-fields, the labourers' carts, the patient horses—all the sights and scenes of pastoral life which were growing so dear to him. From those sights, at once so restful and familiar, his eyes turned to the letter in his hand. As he read the first few lines his whole face changed—a look, glad, incredulous and passionately joyful, swept away its former gloom.

One breathless exclamation escaped him as his eyes devoured the page which from a thing of dread had become a messenger of gladness. Thoughts, passions, desires long suppressed, leapt into warm strong life, and beat like the pinions of chained eagles within his breast.

"Free! free at last—at last! Oh, God of heaven be praised!"

—and the rush of tears to his eyes was no shame to manhood in that moment of ineffable relief and heartfelt thankfulness.

He left the room and shut himself up in his study for a time. He felt he could not face even his friend or his son till he had in some measure calmed himself. That hour of solitude was a strange and painful one. This time there was no possibility of mistake. The lawyer's letter, dry and strictly legal in its details, gave him the full particulars of his wife's death. It had been a terrible one, the result of a dissipated life, and of long-indulged intemperance—a death that fought to the last for that gift it had so prodigally wasted, that had refused to believe the verdict pronounced or the self-wrought doom it had so audaciously challenged.

The penalty of an evil and vicious life is that most fearful penalty of *conscious* retribution. No escape, no hope, no possibility of subterfuge. Stern as a judge the spirit stands at a bar of self-accusation, and knows with the full stern knowledge of despair that it must reap what it has sown.

The soft creeds, the whispered hopes, the flattery of self-delusion are banished at last.

Forewarned of doom irrevocable it sees the Angel of Hope at last fold its patient wings and sadly veil its face before the truth. That self within self for which there seems no better name than "Consciousness," has eyes which are at last ruthlessly unveiled. Knowing all that can be known, it waives aside all need of confession and demands what possible plea can be raised for mercy! For linked with this consciousness in a greater or lesser degree there is a sense of moral life and moral obligation a perception of diviner truth than man can teach, and according to the use or abuse of this implanted sense so is the judgment that the soul must perforce pronounce and receive.

These thoughts came and went within Paul Amersley's mind as he pictured that terrible scene which had sent him freedom with a curse from dying lips—a wish which however courteously disguised was but the vindictive utterance of a helplessness that saw its venomous spite could be but a blessing in disguise.

"I would have stood between him and his hopes to the last hour of his life if I could." So she bade them write to him, and the first sweet delirious sense of joy that had filled his heart grew chilled despite himself, as if that ill-omened wish might

yet find ways and means to part him from his long-coveted treasure.

"I must not lose another hour!" Paul cried at last, as he sprang to his feet and locked away letters and certificate within his *secrétaire*. "I will go to London at once and see her. Oh, my darling, to know you may be mine again in honour and in safety! . . . It seems almost too wonderful to believe."

He sought Müller then and told him as briefly as possible of what had happened. The old German's remark was brief and to the point. "Go to her at once—tell her I wait here to welcome her to her rightful home at last."

Once before had Paul Amersley pursued a quest such as that on which he now was bent. Once before with joy and anguish beating at his heart and making every moment leaden-weighted that delayed his hopes, had he hurried through those well-known London streets.

It was night when he reached Sheba's dwelling, but no thought of time could have stayed him, nor any plea or obstacle withheld him from her presence. Breathless, trembling, sick with fear and expectance and that vague shadow of disappointment which always chills the expectation of a great joy, so he stood at last at the well-known gate and rang the bell for admission.

It seemed to echo loudly and strangely, and yet imperatively audible as was the sound, no one appeared to answer it.

With sinking heart he rang again and yet again, but the result was the same. He walked to the other side of the road and tried to look over the dividing wall. He could only see the upper windows of the villa—dark, curtainless, with that look of non-occupation which bespeaks the absence of a tenant. Then his eyes caught sight of a board, ominous and unmistakable, showing its printed surface with inviting appeal to all the world save one person who now read it—

"To be let, this charming Bijou Villa——"

Amersley read no more.

What need? Evidently fate was not yet tired of persecuting him.

(To be continued.)

The British Sovereign Ladies of the Brunswick Dynasty.

No. I.—SOPHIA DOROTHEA, CONSORT OF GEORGE I.

"SOME," observes James Boswell in that sententious style which he commonly adopted after enjoying the benefit of the conversation of the Sage of Fleet Street for some weeks, "some have affected to laugh at the 'History of the House of Yvery'—a work which we may here explain for the information of those who may not be already aware of it, was printed only for private circulation. "It would be well if many others would transmit their pedigrees to posterity with the same accuracy and generous zeal with which the noble lord who compiled that work has honoured and perpetuated his ancestry. Family histories, like the *imagines majorum* of the ancients, excite to virtue."

Unable as we are to emulate the grandiloquent manner in which Boswell has expressed his opinion, we cannot but fully endorse it, for we conceive that the life of an individual furnishes, upon the whole, the most agreeable of all literary subjects, other than the merely romantic, to the majority of readers. Thinking thus, we propose to introduce to the notice of our readers the four British sovereign ladies of the House of Guelph. These four ladies, as subjects, could hardly be exceeded, in the matter of variety, by any four queens *en suite*. The first was Sophia Dorothea, the melancholy captive of Ahlden, of whom we shall presently discourse. The second was Caroline, the great, the genial and the coarse, who managed by the aid of Sir Robert Walpole to govern her country, to keep on amicable terms with her consort, while he was enjoying himself at Herrenhausen, and to suppress her own womanly jealousy, partly for the sake of ambition, partly for the sake of self-respect, partly for the sake of a lingering kindness for her sensual and brutal consort. The third was Charlotte, the wife of George the Third, the "Sweet Queen" of Frances Burney, the friend of Mrs. Delany, the butt of Peter Pindar, and the mother of the First Gentleman in Europe, a woman who played the part of queen of England during one of the stormiest periods of her history, and who lived

and ruled through many sad and strange vicissitudes, both domestic and public. The fourth was Caroline of Brunswick, the ill-starred, the ill-bred, the ill-married, the ill-conducted, a heroine of an enthusiasm the most generous, and of scandals as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore for multitude. By the aid of the voluminous memoirs, diaries, and budgets of correspondence which line the shelves of our library, we propose to sketch the careers of these four sovereign ladies of our realm. These are the safest guides to history, for they reveal what those who lived in the times in which they were written, thought, and said, and hoped, and feared. They are the more to be trusted because they were not intended for any such purpose, but were the natural result of the daily lives of those by whom they were written.

The first British queen of the House of Guelph, then, was she whose name stands at the head of this article, and it is of her that we wish first to speak. She was born at Zelle on the 15th day of September, 1666. Her father was George William, Duke of Zelle, who was the second son of George, Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg. Her mother was the daughter of the Marquis d'Albreuse, a Protestant gentleman of Poitou, who had quitted France shortly after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The marriage of this pair was at first regarded only as one of those convenient left-handed contracts which excluded their descendants from the father's rank and titles. It received, however, at a subsequent date its legal consummation, causing the young Sophia Dorothea to be acknowledged as a princess. This step, of course, instantly changed the aspect of the young damsel's worldly affairs. The Bishop of Osnabruck, a curious compound of the sensualist and of the Church militant here on earth, who had waxed very merry over his brother's marriage, came to the conclusion that whether for the better or for the worse, the youthful princess was bound to exercise some influence over the fortunes of the House of Brunswick-Lüneburg.

Sophia Dorothea's mother, the Duchess of Zelle, who was an ornament of her sex, had set her heart upon a union between her daughter and Anthony Ulrich, Duke of Wolfenbuttel, a son of a cousin of her spouse. The result was that Germany was soon informed of the betrothal of Sophia Dorothea to Prince Frederick Augustus, the eldest son of the duke. Not long after his betrothal the young prince went to fight at the

siege of Phillipsburg and was mortally wounded. The younger brother of the deceased prince was the next suitor for the hand of the fair Sophia, but the Duke of Wolfenbittel, however, saw fit, for some unaccountable reason, to defer the betrothal.

At this time the lay Bishop of Osnabruck kept his court at Hanover, some twenty miles distant from Zelle. The bishop loved the fair sex with a love that many waters could not quench, and our readers will consequently not be surprised to learn that his lordship had his favourites. Among these favourites none stood higher in the episcopal good books than a certain Madame von Platen, whose husband was subsequently elevated to the high position of prime minister. To the court of the Bishop of Osnabruck—a court which we may here take the opportunity of informing the reader was a miniature of that of Louis the Fourteenth—came the Duchess of Zelle. The society in which she found herself was, to say the least, a congenial society. Many eminent men were to be found within its precincts, and none found his company more in request than the great mathematician and philosopher, William Godfrey Leibnitz, who at that time was councillor of the court. Leibnitz, whom Nature had endowed with a noble intellect, had the singular good fortune of being patronized by three generations of the Brunswick-Lüneburg family, and expressed his gratitude by becoming their chronicler. The first volume of his elaborate history of the House of Brunswick was published in the year 1707, a second and third in the years 1710 and 1711. The fair section of the family appreciated his company, it is said, far more than the males did. And we can well understand why. They possessed as much contempt for learning as they did for decency. Leibnitz weakened his vast powers by engaging in too many pursuits. Gibbon, the Roman historian, said that he not only attempted more than he could finish, but designed more than he could execute, and compared him to those heroes who had lost their empire in the ambition of universal conquest.

Madame von Platen all this time had been busy in concerting a disappointment for the Wolfenbittel family and the House of Zelle. She was singularly devoted to the Brunswick-Lüneberg family, and wished to bring about a marriage between Sophia Dorothea and George Lewis, the Crown Prince of Hanover and eldest son of the Bishop of Osnabruck. To prevent a possible misapprehension, just let us here say that the bishopric of Osnabruck

bruck was a very ancient see, tradition ascribing its foundation to the Emperor Charlemagne. After the great religious schism of the sixteenth century, headed by Luther, Calvin and Melancthon and others, a vast number of the inhabitants of Osnabruck had embraced the Protestant faith. In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia was concluded at Osnabruck, and the result of this was that it was arranged that the occupant of the see should be alternately a Lutheran and a Papist, and that the selection of a bishop should be vested in the chapter, who were invariably to nominate a member of the family of Brunswick-Lüneberg. The result of this extraordinary arrangement was that the Bishops of Osnabruck, whether Catholic or Protestant, were the least distinguished for the episcopal graces.

The consequences of the intrigues of Madame von Platen soon became apparent. The Prince Augustus William went his way a disappointed bachelor, and soon afterwards Sophia Dorothea, like a dutiful daughter, accepted the hand of the Crown Prince of Hanover, eldest son of the Bishop of Osnabruck, at Zelle, on the 21st of November, 1682. The marriage was celebrated with all the proper splendour. The Crown Prince brought home his bride on the 11th of December, and the event was attended by great festivities and rejoicings.

Madame von Platen, in common with a great many more people in her day and generation, considered that happiness was no object of princely matrimonial engagements. For the connubial felicity of those in whose union she had expressed so deep an interest it was evident that she cared not a brass farthing. Yet for a little while the Princess Sophia found her residence at the court of Hanover by no means an unpleasant one. Her amiability, her strict performance of conjugal duties, her graceful reconciliation to the responsibilities, the cares, and the annoyances of her position, won the admiration both of her parents and of her husband. The son of the Crown Prince and Princess of Hanover was born at Hanover on the 30th of October, 1683, and was baptized with the name of George Augustus. For some time after this event perfect happiness existed between the Crown Prince and his spouse. But this, however, did not suit the book of Madame Platen, who now, in consequence of her husband having been created a baron, bore the title of a baroness. She desired to see the bonds of unity dissolved, and she determined

that it should be from no fault of hers if they were not. In 1686 the Crown Princess gave birth to a daughter who was christened after her mother. Soon afterwards Madame Platen introduced to the Crown Prince a young and beautiful woman named Ermengard Melusina von Schulenburg. This damsel, who had been carefully coached in the part she was to play by the intriguing baroness, speedily acquired an extraordinary influence over the Crown Prince. In a few months the occasions were rare on which the Crown Prince was not enjoying the society of this bewitching Dulcinea. The consequences may be easily divined. A wide and irreparable breach was opened between the Crown Prince and his spouse, who saw plainly enough how matters stood. Nor did Madame Schulenburg set herself either to mitigate in the slightest degree the line of conduct which she was pursuing, or to abstain from annoying and insulting the injured wife by every means in her power.

Long before her marriage with the Crown Prince, in the days of her childhood, Sophia Dorothea had had a playmate in the person of Philip Christopher Königsmark, a member of a celebrated Swedish family, of whom since her childhood she had completely lost sight. By the death of an elder brother and of an uncle, the young man had succeeded to the title of a count, and had inherited great wealth. He had travelled with his tutor in England, France and other European countries, and had seen as much of continental life as young men of rank in those days commonly did. Between his own family and that of Brunswick-Lüneburg, a cordial intimacy had long subsisted. When, therefore, he became his own master, he presented himself naturally at the court of Hanover, where, having received from its sovereign the appointment of colonel of the Guard, he resumed his friendship with an old friend in the person of the Crown Princess Sophia Dorothea.

Not insignificant were the personal charms of the young Count Königsmark. His polished manners, his graceful carriage, his immense wealth, the costly style in which he lived, were the constant theme of admiration. No one understood better than he what Lord Chesterfield has called the difficult art of pleasing. In that art he was unexcelled. To enjoy his society—to recall her childish days with all their innocent delights—to listen with rapt attention to his observations on the different countries which he

had visited—to smile with merry smiles at his witty remarks—these were some and assuredly not the least of the charms which the Crown Princess found in the society of the young and handsome Count Königsmark.

Had this close friendship which had subsisted between the pair been unperceived? Had the mutual gratification which they had apparently found in each other's society been allowed to pass unrecognized? Most certainly it had not. The wily Baroness von Platen had kept her eyes uncommonly wide open. She saw, or rather imagined she saw, much that did not meet the eye of others. Henceforth she left no stone unturned in order to blast the reputation of the innocent daughter-in-law of her sovereign, who in due course raised her husband to the higher dignity of a count.

The Countess von Platen, when she saw the partiality which the young Count Königsmark displayed for the society of the Crown Princess, endeavoured to wriggle herself into his good graces. He had sense enough, however, fully to perceive what manner of woman she was, and like the deaf adder stopped his ears to the voice of the charmer, wisely as she charmed. She experienced similar treatment at the hands of the Crown Princess, and this stung her to madness. She determined that both should be humbled, and that until that could be brought about they should smart under her repeated insults. And that they accordingly did, in public as well as in private.

All this time the intimacy between the Crown Prince of Hanover and Madame Schulenburg had ripened. One day while Sophia Dorothea was taking a promenade, accompanied by her attendant, Mademoiselle Knesebeck, a poor and aged woman whose necessities she had more than once relieved drew near to her and informed her in a very mysterious manner that Mademoiselle Schulenburg had recently given birth to a daughter of whom the Crown Prince was father! Dumbfounded at this assertion, the princess questioned Mademoiselle Knesebeck respecting the knowledge she possessed of her husband's intrigues. Consideration for her feelings had hitherto kept the attendant's tongue quiet, but she now confessed all that she knew to her royal mistress. This, of course, was no more than that with which almost everybody, except the wronged and insulted wife, had long been fully acquainted.

No sooner did the Princess Sophia become aware of these facts

than she returned to the palace and hastily sought the apartments of her husband. Finding him alone she upbraided him for his unfaithfulness. But the Crown Prince retorted in a style worthy of a vulgar profligate, who was lost to every sense of decency and of honour. A harsh quarrel ensued. Loud screams and cries for assistance echoed through the palace. The attendants burst into the apartment only in time to save their mistress from strangulation. The event aroused much indignation. The Bishop of Osnabruck demanded an explanation. The Crown Prince gave his. The Crown Princess gave hers. The exaggerations of the prince caused his wife to appear a perfect fury, who had been actuated by a blind and unaccountable jealousy to wreak a summary vengeance on his person! In thorough disgust the poor princess returned to her parents' roof at Zelle, when the kind attentions of her mother soon restored her drooping spirits. As her faithful attendant, Mademoiselle Knesebeck, and her children had accompanied her thither, she determined not to return to the profligate court of Hanover again.

Our readers may be perfectly assured that the dissensions between the Crown Prince and his spouse had been productive of infinite gratification to one person in particular. That one person was the Countess Platen, who now gave the prince all the encouragement that she could to persist in his shameful courses. Nor did she omit secretly to endeavour to poison the mind of the Duke of Zelle against his daughter by base insinuations of her conduct towards Count Königsmark. The effects of this step were, as may be conjectured, most disastrous. Her father came to the conclusion that she did not know how to govern her temper, and insisted on her returning to her husband with as little delay as possible. She begged, she entreated, she implored her father to shelter her. But the unfeeling old man refused. Almost broken-hearted, Sophia Dorothea was forced to enter a carriage and to return to Hanover, where she lived a most wretched life. She passed her days entirely with her children, to whom she proved herself a most tender mother, and with Mademoiselle Knesebeck, who, save them, was her only associate. She was now surrounded by a host of enemies and hemmed in by spies on every side. The Countess Platen, during her absence, had procured the dismissal of all her former attendants, and had caused their places to be supplied by a set of wretches who acted

as informers, and reported to her everything that Sophia Dorothea either said or did. Of all these machinations the hapless princess became fully aware, but she resolved to bear them with perfect resignation.

Shortly before the return of the Princess Sophia to Hanover, the Countess Platen had succeeded in winning the good graces of the Count Königsmark, and, in the absence of her husband, had compromised herself with him to such an extent that he deemed it wise to beat a precipitate retreat from the court of Hanover. This step he was the more disposed to take because the scandal which had spread far and wide respecting their intimacy had moved her to endeavour to induce the count to marry her daughter. That he stoutly refused to do, to her no small annoyance, and, bidding her adieu, set merrily off for the profligate court of Augustus, Elector of Saxony, at Dresden. In that court he had expected to find unlimited pleasure, and unlimited pleasure he found. For a parallel to the vices of Frederick Augustus, Elector (who was subsequently King of Poland), or for a parallel to the licentiousness of his court, we must express our utter inability to know where to look. The visitors gloried in narrating their conquests over the fair sex. Count Königsmark was invited to contribute his quota to the budget, and told many amusing and diverting, though it is to be feared not scrupulously veracious, stories of his adventures with the Countess Platen and Mademoiselle Schulenburg, whom he depicted in characters the reverse of virtuous, and set the table in a roar by limning the characters of those worthies in colours the reverse of complimentary. But in so doing the count made a terrible mistake. He utterly forgot that it was dangerous to take liberties, at a public table, with the reputation of a woman so revengeful and so influential as the spouse of the prime minister at the court of Hanover. And in no long interval was he made to smart for his indiscretions. The merry tales that the count had innocently related at the court of Dresden were carried back, adorned with sundry embellishments of his own of course, by a nobleman to the Countess Platen at Hanover. She was furious when she heard of them. The count's life was the only thing that would glut her revenge.

At the first opportunity the countess acquainted the Elector of the slights that had been cast upon her and Madame Schulen-

burg. Finding that she did not make so much impression upon his mind by this course of procedure as she had anticipated, she, in the next place, declared that the count had uttered offensive observations concerning the sovereign of Hanover. This was a lie; but the Elector not only believed it but took it seriously to heart, and readily gave a promise that the offences of the count should be visited with punishment. But that was not all. Emboldened by success, the Countess Platen gave the reins to her fertile imagination, and made a series of slanderous allegations concerning the count's relations with the Princess Sophia, and went even to the length of insinuating that the princess and the count were in league with the Duke of Wolfenbittel. It is just, however, in regard to this, to say that the Elector expressed his willingness to believe these assertions only on the production of irrefutable evidence.

The task of the countess now became to procure evidence. Nor had she long to wait. As gay and as brilliant as ever, and utterly ignorant of the danger in which he stood, the handsome Count Königsmark returned to the court of Hanover. The reception he met with was of the coldest character. That, however, sat very lightly upon him, and he retired to his chamber, where he discovered a note written in pencil by the Princess Sophia Dorothea, inviting him to visit her that evening. Late as the hour was he went straight to the princess's apartments, and was admitted. But the princess expressed the greatest surprise at seeing him at such an hour; he produced the note of invitation which she had sent him. The moment she cast her eyes upon it she saw it was a forgery. Such a discovery, it might have been supposed, would have put the friends on their guard. But it did nothing of the kind. They had so much to say to one another, so much to communicate, which they felt they would not probably be able to find another opportunity of saying, that time sped on. In the presence of her attendant, Mademoiselle Knesebeck, the princess opened her heart at great length to the count, who suggested that she should fly with him to the hospitable roof of the Duke of Wolfenbittel, forty miles distant, and place herself under the protection of Count Anthony Ulrich. The princess caught at the idea, and promised to get all things in readiness. The hour was growing late. Mademoiselle Knesebeck had repeatedly warned them of the time, and of the danger they

incurred by remaining in the private apartments of the Crown Prince. At a late hour the count, with many professions of fidelity and devotion to the princess, retired to his apartment.

Who had forged the note which had brought the count at such an unseasonable hour to the presence of Sophia Dorothea? We answer, the Countess Platen. That bright specimen of humanity literally gloated over the success of her wiles. Her delight knew no bounds. To vanquish her enemy on her own ground was as meat and drink to her.

So soon as the Countess Platen became aware that her note had served its purpose, and that Count Königsmark was in the company of Sophia Dorothea, she sought the presence of the Elector, and created quite a *furor* over the matter, and insisted on his being arrested. With great reluctance, the old man, who was the complete dupe of the countess, consented, and yielded to her request to see the orders obeyed instantly. Three *trabants*, or yeomen of the guard, were therefore placed at her disposal, and were directed to arrest a person whom she would point out, and that if he dared to resist they were at liberty to use their weapons. Having arranged these matters, the countess conducted the soldiers into the hall that led by three steps to the apartments which faced the Leine Street. From this place three steps led in another direction to a passage that led to the adjoining wing of the palace, facing the same street, to the door of the "Saloon of the Knights." In that apartment projected a capacious chimney. Behind this capacious chimney the *trabants* were directed to hide. While they remained in that position the countess furnished them with refreshments, and with as much liquor as she conceived would fit them for their desperate task. Admirably had the time been selected. Just as they were ripe for murder, a sound was heard as of approaching footsteps. Whispering to them to bear in mind the handsome reward which the Elector would give them if they seized his enemy, who, she declared, had been condemned by the laws, and to deal severely with him, if he attempted to escape, she ordered them to lie close.

Whose were the approaching footsteps? They were those of Count Königsmark. He had discovered that all the usual outlets had been closed, and thus had been obliged to endeavour to make his exit from the palace out of the Saloon of Knights, through the passage into the hall. The mysterious note had flashed

through his mind more than once, and he became apprehensive. He was approaching the chimney, and congratulating himself that at last he was close to the outer door of the palace, and would soon be at liberty to accomplish the wishes of the Princess Sophia, when a rush was suddenly made at him by several armed men. Darkness reigned supreme. He was utterly unable to see how many his assailants were. But his sword was out of its sheath in an instant. Maddened by drink and urged on by the Countess Platen, the *trabants* attacked him with might and main. A desperate conflict ensued. Victory might have been scored by the count had not his sword snapped in two. He called aloud for help. But his cries were silenced. Overpowered, he was easily secured and borne into a neighbouring apartment, where the alarmed *trabants* discovered that the person they had arrested was so severely wounded as to be utterly incapable of standing upright. The count had just strength enough to murmur an entreaty to "spare the innocent princess," though they murdered him when he fell in a swoon on the floor.

When the unfortunate Count Königsmark regained consciousness, the very first object that met his eyes was the face of his malignant enemy bending over him. In every feature the most triumphant malice was expressed. Rallying all his remaining strength he strove to denounce his murderess. But his mouth was stopped by the foot of the countess, who barbarously trod on his wounded face. A few minutes later the murdered nobleman expired.

The horror which the yeomen of the guard displayed when they discovered that they had murdered Count Königsmark was equalled only by their fear. The threats of the countess, however, induced them to remain quiet, and when the Elector was brought upon the scene he was horrified and frightened. The *trabants* declared that they had acted only in self-defence, and that the count had met his death only by reason of the rashness which he had displayed in rushing upon them. For long the Elector refused to believe this version of the story, but the countess at last induced him to credit it, and all traces of the murder having been obliterated, the corpse of the count was flung into a hole, covered with quicklime and walled up. It says much for the secrecy and the skilfulness with which these measures were taken when we say that no one in the palace during the night

was disturbed by them. Some persons said the next morning that they had heard a slight noise but had taken no notice of it, and from that day to this, nothing of any definite character has yet come to light respecting the fate of Count Königsmark, though his mysterious disappearance created no small stir at the courts of Europe at the time.

During the eighteenth century many solutions of the mystery were propounded. Horace Walpole, who had good opportunities for knowing the truth, tells us only this: that the count was strangled on leaving the apartments of the princess, and that his body was secreted under the floor of her dressing-room, where it was discovered in the reign of George the Second, during his first visit to Hanover, on making some alterations in the palace.* "George the Second," adds Walpole, "entrusted the secret to his wife, Queen Caroline, who told it to my father, but the king was too tender of the honour of his mother to utter it to his mistress, nor did Lady Suffolk ever hear of it till I informed her of it several years afterwards."† Archdeacon Coxe was, we think, nearer the truth when he asserted that Königsmark was discovered quitting the chamber of the princess by the Elector, who had been concealed in the gallery by the Countess Platen, "and was instantly assassinated by persons whom she had suborned for that purpose." Mademoiselle Knesebeck, who wrote a narrative of the life of her hapless mistress, seems to have been aware that the count was slain while resisting his arrest, but offers no information and no details.

Our narrative has been based upon an authentic biography of Sophia Dorothea, published more than half a century ago, and containing the death-bed confessions of the Countess Platen and of Buswann, one of the *trabants*, both of whom, strange to relate, were attended in their last hours by the same divine. ‡

Utterly unconscious of the terrible catastrophe which we have narrated, Sophia Dorothea packed her trunks in the full belief that she would be able to effect her escape with the count. Gloomy forebodings had more than once filled her mind, and these were increased when early on the following morning she discovered that some of the count's servants were waiting for him in the

* Walpole's *Memoirs of the Court of George I.*, Works, i., p. 3.

† Ibid.

‡ Colburn's *Memoirs of Sophia Dorothea*, i., p. 21 *et seq.*

street. She quickly ascertained that their master had not been seen by any of his domestics since he had entered the palace on the previous evening. She was also informed that the count's apartments had been searched, and that all his papers had been seized. Such a piece of intelligence caused the princess great uneasiness. For why? Because among that mass of correspondence were many of her own letters to him, in which she had expressed herself with more freedom than prudence. But anxiety for herself soon gave place to anxiety for the count. Had he been observed? Had he become aware that proceedings had been instituted against him? Had he escaped? These questions were perpetually before her mind, and greatly agitated her mind.

In the interim the Countess Platen had not been idle. In high glee she laid the incriminating correspondence before the Elector, and set herself deliberately to make mountains out of mole-hills. The princess, fearing that she would be seriously compromised, wrote to her father beseeching his protection. But the inhuman brute was sullen and vindictive. Nor could her mother render her any assistance, much as she desired to do so. Before long Count Platen arrived at Zelle, and represented the misconduct of the Princess Sophia in such damaging terms that the duke readily consented to a separation between her and the crown prince. Count Platen returned with this to Hanover, and exultantly informed the princess of it. Desirous of insulting the victim of the machinations of his wanton wife, he questioned her respecting her alleged criminal intimacy with the count, and was scornfully asked in return whether he mistook her for his own wife, whose intrigues with the deceased colonel of the Guards were matters of the most public notoriety. Up to that moment the princess had been kept in utter ignorance of Königsmark's fall. Platen was stung by the princess's retort, and informed her there and then that the count had been killed in resisting his arrest by the orders of the Elector after quitting her apartments. Stunned by this piece of information, as she well might be, the unhappy princess lost all her sense of prudence and of self-control.

She was ordered to leave Hanover, and Hanover she accordingly left. The Elector and his consort, as well as the great body of the people, believed that she was utterly innocent. At a special

celebration of the communion in the electoral palace at Hanover, Sophia Dorothea solemnly partook of the eucharist in vindication of her innocence, and at the conclusion of the ceremony turned to Count Platen and requested him to solicit his wife similarly to testify her innocence. It might have been supposed that this solemn act on the part of the princess would have sufficiently established her truth and innocence. Far from that. Bigotry, intolerance, folly, revenge, treachery and slander were each hard at work undermining her reputation. The result of the machinations was that a Consistorial Court was established in August, 1694, composed of the most learned lawyers who practised in the ecclesiastical courts of Zelle and of Hanover. These officials having examined the merits and demerits of the Crown Prince and his consort, and having heard evidence on both sides, pronounced sentence of divorce on the 28th of December, 1694. Doubts were of course entertained respecting the legality of such a decision, and even the legal adviser of the princess required a security from proceedings in relation to his connection with her affairs. The sentence was, however, carried into practical effect, and the princess was conducted to the place of her incarceration, for it had been arranged that she should be a prisoner for life. The castle of Ahlden, a small fortress situated on the south bank of the river Aller, was the prison of the princess, who was now to bear the title of the Duchess of Ahlden. Her suite, five in number, were all spies, and creatures of the Countess Platen, who watched the prisoner narrowly, and reported every observation and action which they deemed of importance to their employer. These things, however, the princess treated with indifference, and captive as she was, led a most useful and honourable life. She enriched the parish church with many valuable ornaments, and when the village was almost razed to ashes by a fire, contributed a large sum towards the rebuilding of it in a more commodious fashion. Though she was unable to correspond with her children, she found means to correspond with her mother, and this rendered her situation more tolerable. In 1698 the Elector of Hanover died, and was succeeded in the electorate by his eldest son, the worthless husband of Sophia Dorothea. Determining that her imprisonment should continue for the term of her natural life, he caused the zealous watch over her conduct which he had established to be increased. On the

1st of August, 1714, Queen Anne of England died. The Elector of Hanover was thereupon proclaimed King of England in London, York; and other cities without any opposition, although a numerous section of the nation sympathized in the misfortunes of the exiled Stuarts, and would have readily effected their restoration had it been at all practicable.

King George the First, as the Elector of Hanover was now styled, departed for England, leaving his wife still a prisoner. With him went the daughter of the Countess Platen (whose discreditable career had been brought to an ignominious termination in 1706) and Mademoiselle Schulenburg, who had so cruelly blasted the happiness of the blameless Princess Sophia soon after her ill-starred nuptials had been consummated. With these favourites went a tribe of men who were equally destitute both of principle and of honesty, notably Count Bernstorff, Baron Bothmar and Count Robethon, and two captive Turks named Mustapha and Mahomet.

Surrounded by these satellites the first British king of the House of Brunswick ascended the throne. Nor was it long before he degraded himself by permitting them to gratify themselves by his favour. The manner in which he complied with the sordid desires of this unprincipled crew, evinced the most culpable disregard of public opinion. Mademoiselle Schulenburg, in the year 1716, was elevated to the Irish peerage, with the styles and titles of Baroness of Dundalk, Countess and Marchioness of Dungannon, and Duchess of Munster, and two years later she was raised to the dignity of a peeress of England, with the additional titles of Baroness Glastonbury, Countess of Feversham, and Duchess of Kendal. At a later date Madame Kielmansegge was raised to the peerage. On the death of her husband, in the year 1721, she was created Countess of Leinster. In April, 1722, she became Baroness of Brentford and Countess of Darlington. "No wonder that the mob of London were so highly diverted at the importation of so uncommon a seraglio," says Horace Walpole. "They were food for all the venom of the Jacobites, and, indeed, nothing could be grosser than the ribaldry that was vomited out in lampoons, libels, and every channel of abuse, against the sovereign and the new court. One of the German ladies, being abused by the mob, was said to have put her head out of the coach, and cried in bad English, 'Good people, why you abuse

us? We come for all your goods!' 'Yes,' shouted a fellow in the crowd, 'and for all our chattels too.'"

Meanwhile, the Princess Sophia Dorothea languished in captivity at Ahlden. The hope deferred that maketh the heart sick made sad ravages in her once happy disposition. But George the First cared nothing for that. He and his favourites sat down to and rose up to play, and sickened the nation with their dishonesty and rapacity. No wonder rumours of assassination filled the air, when, in 1725, he called upon Parliament to defray the debts of the civil list, which amounted only to four hundred thousand pounds, and opened the eyes of the nation to the fact that, besides the vast resources, he had since his accession to the throne contrived to squander half a million of money. The public mind was in a very restless state. A rebellion, for the purpose of returning the exiled Stuarts, seemed imminent. But the king was perfectly indifferent. Still he continued the same reckless course, still he continued to impoverish the country, still he continued to enrich his greedy favourites, already over enriched.

As old age began to creep upon the king, however, he became sensible of some compunctious warnings of conscience in regard to his shameful conduct towards his innocent wife. Careful as he had ever been to keep her in custody, he had been no less solicitous in regard to her health. The explanation of such solicitude is, we think, to be found in the fact that he was a slave to superstition. Many years before, an old woman, who had enjoyed the reputation of a prophetess, had warned him to care for his wife, whom he would not survive more than twelve months, in the event of her preceding him to the grave. It was especially noticeable that this prophecy caused apprehension the older he grew. Nor is it improbable that, but for the influence of the cormorants with which he had surrounded himself, he would have restored his consort to all her rights, and that he would have acknowledged even the injustice which had been done to her. But nothing was done. The king among his people, meanwhile, was as unpopular a monarch as ever stepped in two shoes. His unprepossessing features, his ungainly figure, his coarse manners, his ignorance of our manners and customs, furnished the purveyors of squibs, satires and caricatures with an everlasting theme. The sanguinary measures which His Majesty had taken to repress

the rising of the old Pretender in 1715, had tended only towards increasing the ill will which the people bore towards him. At home and abroad he was threatened with war. More than once English troops had been compelled to retreat before the advancing foe. A navy debt of no less than one million seven hundred thousand pounds had been contracted. It was while cogitating on these things, in the autumn of 1726, that he received the intelligence that his consort had been laid prostrate by fever. Despair had done its work. Mental derangement set in. She spoke repeatedly of the cruel wrongs which had been inflicted upon her. Even the spies were awe-struck at the terrible earnestness with which she denounced them and the wretch by whom they had been hired. From the beginning of September, 1726, the sufferer continued daily to grow worse and worse. On the 18th she was a corpse.

Soon the news reached England. The king shook like an aspen leaf when he heard it. The prophecy flashed across his mind, and the still small voice of conscience followed the whirlwind of excitement which had disquieted his soul within him. The news of his wife's death came to him as the warning of his own death. There was no peace for him in England. Like that other guilty monarch of old he saw the ominous handwriting on the walls of his palace. An irresistible desire to visit Hanover took possession of him. On the 3rd of June, 1727, he quitted England in the company of the Duchess of Kendal and the Marquess of Townshend. Both of these companions were, however, left at different places on reaching the German territory, and the king himself pushed forward to Zelle alone. At Zelle the poor queen had been consigned with befitting honours to the family vaults.

All the official accounts concur in asserting that on the morning of the 10th of June, 1727, the King of England was seized with a fit of apoplexy while travelling in his carriage. They further state that on reaching a place called Ippenburen, he was discovered in a state of insensibility, with his eye-balls glaring fixedly and with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. The attendants proposed that they should halt and procure medical aid. The king, however, ejaculated the words "Osnabruck! Osnabruck!" and for this spot they set off at a gallop. "Osnabruck! Osnabruck!" were the last words which

the king was ever heard to utter. When Osnabruck was reached the king was discovered dead. In the "Lockhart Papers,"* there is another version of the king's death, which alleges that a paper which Sophia Dorothea had written summoning her husband to appear within the year and the day at the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the long and many injuries which she had received from him, was handed to the king near Osnabruck. It is said that he opened it immediately, supposing that it had come from Hanover; that he was seized with apoplexy as soon as he had perused its contents; that after having been blooded his mouth turned awry; and that he begged to be driven to Osnabruck, and died before the horses could reach the city. Whether there be any truth in the foregoing story or whether there be not we cannot say, nor do we think it necessary to pause for the purpose of inquiring. The fact remains that the king died and that he was buried within the confines of the electoral dominion of Hanover. It was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, we believe, who styled George the First "an honest blockhead," and it is impossible, we think, not to endorse her ladyship's view of him.

Some of our readers may be tempted to inquire what was the end of the two women who so wantonly wrecked the vessel of Sophia Dorothea's earthly happiness. To such we would reply that the Duchess of Kendal, when she found that she could do nothing by infamous courses, retired into private life, and died at her residence at Kendal House, near Twickenham, in the spring, 1743, at the ripe old age of eighty-four, and leaving immense riches behind her. Thirteen years previously she had been preceded to the grave by the Countess of Darlington, whose position had been supplied by a daughter of the Countess of Macclesfield, who continued to reside at St. James's Palace until the demise of the first George and the accession of the second.

WILLIAM CONNOR SYDNEY.

* Vol. ii., p. 351.

The Wooing of Lady Merlyon.

It was Christmas Eve, and the interior of Stanmoulton Castle, with all its luxurious comfort of roaring fires in every room and corridor, its soft yielding carpets and heavy hangings, was in striking contrast to the winter tumult without.


As Lady Merlyon slowly descended the broad staircase looking even lovelier than her wont, as her maid had been fain to confess to herself, despite a slight touch of acrimony induced by an impatience and absence of mind to which that important young person was quite unaccustomed, the old oak clock was striking half-past seven, and as she compared it with the jewelled toy that she wore upon her wrist, she paused to listen. The fancied sound of wheels had struck her ear and a glad look of expectancy dawned upon her face as, crossing the fine old hall where the firelight danced and gleamed on glossy mass of holly and laurel crowning branching antler and trophied mail and weapon, she drew aside the heavy crimson folds that hid one of the windows and looked out into the darkness, but only to hear the wild rush of the wind and the groaning complaint of the swaying elms. "What a night!" she murmured anxiously, as a fiercer gust than usual brought the rain of falling flakes beating yet more rapidly upon the streaming glass. "What a night for him to be travelling on! and he was looking so frightfully ill when I saw him last! God grant that he may come to no harm!" she added earnestly.

Sylvia, Lady Merlyon, calling on God; she whose God for the twenty-six years of her life had been her own fair luxury-loving self! and invoking His protection for the man to whom she had once deliberately, with callous indifference, dealt the cruellest blow that woman can to man! Verily a Saul among the prophets!

Four years before, when Sylvia Basgrove had engaged herself to handsome Vivian Merlyon, society had shrugged its shoulders and been mildly astonished—as much astonished as it ever permits itself to be. True, he was a man whose love any woman might have been proud to win, but even to those who knew him best and admired him most it was inexplicable that he should have

succeeded in winning the promise of Miss Basgrove's hand. In his blind worship of her he was probably the only one who did not read the character of his promised wife aright, certainly to all the lookers on who knew her—and the reigning beauty of two seasons is by no means an unnoticed unit—it was incomprehensible that the finished woman of the world, whose whole heart and soul were centred in the acquisition of such wealth as with her own social standing and beauty would enable her to satisfy her overwhelming ambition, should have suffered such a lapse from her coldly calculating policy as to allow her name to be coupled seriously with that of a man who, however fascinating, found it hard to make his resources equal to the task of living as one of the most popular men in an expensive regiment.

Perhaps she would have been puzzled to explain it herself. Vanity could scarcely have been her motive, for many a handsome head had bowed before her, many a gallant heart been laid at her dainty feet only to smart and quiver with anguish under that favourite, and somewhat pulverizing, process of hers of reducing them to their equivalent value in pounds, shillings and pence; ennui might have had something to do with it, for at the time of her engagement she was paying a protracted visit to a country house where the chief aim and object of the men's existence was the pursuit of fur and feather, and Miss Basgrove was consequently thrown a good deal into the society in which she was least popular, that of the women of the party; possibly even some spark of passing affection might have been involuntarily kindled in her breast by the passionate ardour of a lover such as few less carefully balanced hearts could have resisted; but in any case, whatever the cause, the dominant longing of her ambitious nature soon reasserted itself, sweeping aside all minor considerations, and Vivian Merlyon's halcyon days of blindly trustful, perfect happiness had only stretched into a few short weeks when the thunderbolt fell from his clear sky. A few short lines carefully worded and politely decisive, a few conventional phrases of "regret" and "self-reproach," a madly despairing appeal met with graceful firmness—and a broken-hearted man set his weary face towards the distant East, while society murmured, "I told you so," with complacent satisfaction, and looked on with interest at the superb *insouciance* with which the fair Sylvia went on her way, parrying with careless indifference the



prompt and venomous attacks of her most intimate female friends; one and all only too delighted to tilt at the joint in the armour of such a formidable rival. Six months after the date of her discarded lover's landing at Bombay found her bearing his name as the bride of his cousin, and mistress of the broad acres and undulating woodlands that surrounded rambling old Wisemount in the south and the stately modern so-called Castle of Stanmoulton in the west, together with the miles upon miles of heather-clad moor and deer forest, which, starting from the snug shooting-box which looked down upon the salmon leaping in the burn of Glen Turroch, marched with Strathmorán and Glenferriagh as far as the Dee.

And now nearly a year had passed away since, in the prime of vigorous manhood, Sir John had been gathered to his fathers, and with the glory of the late summer had returned to the land of his birth Vivian, her old lover, no penniless soldier now, but by right of due succession ninth baronet and owner of everything which she had once sacrificed all truth and honour to obtain.

During his absence he had cut himself utterly adrift from all his former life, and such tidings of him as reached his anxious friends at home were few and far between. Even in this nineteenth century of ours there are spots in our vast Indian empire where a man can almost hide himself from his kind, and in the bitterness of his despair he had grasped eagerly at the offer of political employment, which enabled him to bury himself in the jungle far from all the favoured haunts of European society, and live out his life of misery alone. Such rumours as had reached England of his growing eccentricity, of the increasing savage irritability which had succeeded to his open-hearted *bonhomie* of old, and of his rooted aversion to all intercourse with his fellows, had prepared every one for a change in him; but to none was the reality more startling than to the woman who was its cause. It was then only that she began to realize the full extent of the injury she had done to the man who had so completely trusted her, and she must have been more, or less, than human not to have been moved by a strong feeling of pity for him. She had sent from her side a gallant high-spirited gentleman, full of life and vigour. He returned to her a prematurely aged, haggard-looking man, handsome still; but the eyes that flashed from under the bushy eyebrows were restless and

troubled, and the dark hair, already thin about the temples, was streaked with tell-tale grey. And then with the contrariety of human nature her feelings towards him began to undergo a change. At first she had disliked and dreaded meeting him, but they were perforce thrown together a good deal, and as she saw more of him her interest in him began to deepen. He had not avoided her as she expected; on the contrary, he had shown a marked inclination for her society, and at each meeting she was fain to confess that he exercised a stronger influence over her than in the bygone days of his ardent wooing. And so well nigh a miracle came to pass, for her first sensation of compunction and regret, mingled with remorseful memories of his nature as it had been of old, gradually—at first, but afterwards with an involuntary rapidity that took her unawares—changed to a deeper and a warmer feeling, and before the first snow had laden the branches of the trees she knew within herself that the great secret of life had been revealed to her at last, and that with all the strength of her newly-found heart, without a thought of changed position or of altered means, she had learned to love the very ground on which her once banished lover trod.

With courteous persistence he had insisted on her remaining at Stanmoulton until the New Year should see her arrangements for her future life finally completed, so that she still reigned virtually mistress there when Christmas time drew near; and this, the first since his return, she had persuaded him to celebrate in person by his presence and by Yuletide gifts and festivities among his tenants. She remembered well the strangeness of his manner, as he had at last agreed to it; at first he had demurred; she had pleaded earnestly, more earnestly perhaps than she herself was aware of—urging as her motive the disappointment of the tenants and villagers on this his chief estate, should their new master not put in an appearance amongst them—and had finally prevailed.

"And what will the world say to such a young and lovely hostess entertaining a bachelor like myself?" Sir Vivian had asked, and she had answered with her whole soul in the words, with lowered eyes and tremulous voice, "What matter what the world says if you do not care—or—I!"

So she was expecting him this bitter night of the twenty-fourth of December, and her heart was full of fluttering hope as she stood listening for the wheels of the carriage which had been

sent to meet him at the station, for she knew well that it was no mere creation of her fancy, but a patent fact which had been widely noticed and commented on, that of late his manner towards her had been different, his pleasure in her company more evident than before.

Even as she was about to drop the heavy folds of the curtain and turn away to the pleasant glow within, two fiery eyes appeared through the darkness, and in another moment the brougham, with coachman and horses thickly powdered white, was standing in the flood of light that streamed from the promptly opened door.

As he sprang up the steps Lady Merlyon noticed that in spite of the intense cold Sir Vivian wore neither greatcoat nor wrapper, yet the hand in which he clasped her proffered one was hot and feverish; she was thankful that her back was to the light for, woman of the world though she was, she was conscious of a tell-tale blush that dyed face and neck as she greeted him with gentle reproach.

"How rash you are, Sir Vivian! To be out at all on such a night, after all your Indian sunshine, is bad enough for you, and yet you do not even wrap yourself up!"

"Do you know I had almost forgotten the cold?" he answered, still holding her hand. She was a tall woman, yet he towered above her as they stood. "The hope of a warm welcome has kept it out. But you—you must not brave it like this," gently drawing her away from the open door. There was a note of tenderness in his voice that caused her to glance quickly up at him, to meet his eyes fixed upon her with an earnestness before which her own dropped; and her heart was beating rapidly with a sudden rush of joy as they stood for a few minutes before the huge fire of logs that crackled on the open hearth, while she questioned him about his journey, before dismissing him upstairs to dress.

During dinner, while the presence of the servants confined the conversation to the merest conventionalities, Merlyon was *distract* and restless to a degree. He ate scarcely anything, but drank more than usual; and several times, when full of her own happy thoughts she had allowed herself to lapse into silence, she looked up suddenly, as if forced by a strange compulsion, to find him gazing at her with fixed intensity. She rose directly the wine

was placed upon the table, with a laughing remark about leaving him to the company of his cigarette, but as she passed him, while he opened the door for her, he bent towards her :

"You will be in the drawing-room, shall you not? I shall not be able to stay away from you long—Sylvia."

She could not trust her voice to answer, but bent her head in graceful assent and passed on. For a moment he stood watching her as she crossed the hall, a shudder as of a cold hand laid upon his heart shook his whole frame, and his grasp upon the door tightened convulsively till the sinews stood out like rigid cords; then, as she disappeared, he flung himself into a chair with a sigh that was almost a groan, and covered his face with his hands. Fifteen—twenty—thirty minutes passed, and he had not stirred; but as the marble timepiece on the mantelpiece—"A tribute of respect and esteem from the tenants of the Stanmoulton estate to Sir John Merlyon, Bart., on the occasion of his marriage, November 20th, 188-," as testified by a floridly engraved plate of silver on its pedestal—struck the half-hour after ten, he roused himself with a start, and hastily pouring out and tossing off at a draught a couple of glasses of wine, wiped away the beads of perspiration that stood thick upon his forehead with a trembling hand and followed her.

As he entered the drawing-room his cousin's widow made a lovely picture, standing upon the huge white bearskin that lay before the fire, gazing down into the glowing coals. The black dress of soft clinging lace set off her shapely figure to perfection, and the gleam of the firelight turned the masses of her hair to a deeper tinge of gold as, with one tiny foot resting on the polished fender and idly clasped hands, she stood musing, with a tender expression on her fair face that it had but lately learnt. She turned to greet him as he entered, with a welcoming smile.

"You have actually kept your word, Sir Vivian, and not been *very* long. And now come here and be scolded. Do you know that after all the trouble I have taken to make a little festival of your coming down here for Christmas and the New Year, you have never even condescended to give me the faintest idea of the part you are graciously pleased to be going to take in the festivities?"

He made no answer, but coming straight to her and taking both her hands in his stood looking down at her, and without;

need of words she knew that the crowning moment of her life was come. She could not speak, she could not withdraw her hands, only the fair head drooped lower and yet lower till it lay upon his breast; and he strained her passionately to his bosom. At last he broke the silence. His lips were dry and parched, and his voice sounded harsh and grating as he whispered the words into her ear:

"So you love me, Sylvia?"

She raised her rosy face and eyes humid with unshed tears to his, and he stooped his head as if to stifle with a kiss the "Yes" that fluttered on her tremulous lips; then checking himself suddenly and almost thrusting her from him, with what sounded like a smothered imprecation between his clenched teeth, began to pace the room rapidly with knitted brow. Sylvia stood irresolute, half-frightened, her clasped hands hanging loosely in front of her. At last she uttered his name doubtfully:

"Vivian."

He stopped short and regarded her fixedly, but without attempting to approach her.

"Vivian," she repeated, "you frighten me. Why are you so strange to me?"

Standing there in all the glory of her loveliness, she stretched out her white arms to him in the abandonment of her passion, but they dropped to her sides again and she shrank back as, with a hoarse cry, more like intense pain than triumph, he raised his hands to heaven with a wild gesture of thanksgiving:

"It was false! false! all false! She loves me! she loves me!"

For a moment he stood thus, then, his excitement dying away as quickly as it had arisen, he approached, and placing his arm around her, led her unresisting to a sofa, seating himself beside her.

"I have frightened you, my darling," he said gently. "Forgive me." And under the spell of his eyes the words of surprise and inquiry died upon her lips as she nestled to his side, forgetting all in the intoxication of the moment. His lips brushed her hair as he spoke again:

"Let us go to your boudoir, Sylvia—your own cosy nest—where we need not fear interruption. I have much to say to you——"

"And I to you," she interrupted him, rising, still with his arm

encircling her slender waist. "Oh, Vivian! can you *ever* forgive me?"

"Forgive you! forgive you!" he repeated dreamily. "What place can there be for forgiveness between you and I? Come."

Lady Merlyon had chosen for her boudoir the octagonal chamber that formed the topmost storey of the tower which rose at the eastern end of the building. The only remaining part of the original structure, from which the castle took its name, it had walls of many feet thickness, but on three sides the ancient loopholes had been enlarged to spacious windows which looked out upon many a mile of wood and fertile upland stretching away to north and east and south; a doorway opened on the westward side upon a staircase which, in the thickness of the wall, led from the flat roof above to the lower rooms, and so to the heavy oaken door which shut off the tower from the modern mansion built against it.

Furnished with everything of beauty and luxury that art could devise or pleasure require, it made a fitting retreat for its lovely mistress, and here in the soft subdued light of the shaded lamps Sylvia sobbed out all her new-found love upon her lover's breast, but when she would have humbled herself before him and implored his forgiveness for the past he would not hear; her face was pillowed on his shoulder and his strong arm clasped her closely to him so that she could not see the convulsive working of his features.

"Enough," he broke in. "Have I not said that forgiveness is a word that must not be spoken between you and I, my dearest?"

To her ease-loving nature, abhorring anything of worry or annoyance, the sense of relief in escaping from reproaches and upbraiding for the wrong that she had done was so intensely welcome that she hailed it with an inward thanksgiving and was content—content to let her new-born remorse vanish from the mind like a disappearing mist, leaving her free to abandon herself wholly to the joy of the present. But though his arm was about her and his hand clasped hers he was uneasy and pre-occupied, and at length a long silence fell upon them. The man was the first to break it.

"You reproached me just now with having made no plan to please the people here. Suppose I have a splendid surprise in store for them, and for you—such a festival that they shall

never forget this night that has brought us together again, never more to part! What do you say?"

"This night?" she repeated inquiringly.

"Yes, this very night"—with a catch in his voice. "And now"—disentangling himself from her clinging arms—"I must go and prepare it."

"Must it be now?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Yes, now"—hastily. He spoke with growing excitement and turned towards the door, muttering beneath his breath, but she laid a detaining hand on his sleeve.

"And am I not to be allowed to go with you?" she pleaded with a pretty disappointed pout.

"No, no, my dearest. You remain here."

The words came huskily and with difficulty, and as she marked his increasing agitation a sudden pang of fear struck her.

"No, *not* to-night," she begged. "Vivian, my darling, not to-night. You are not well. Your hands are hot and burning. You are feverish and tired out!"

He stopped her with an angry gesture, then with a sudden movement clasping her in his arms and covering her fair face with kisses he pushed her from him and turned to go, but paused in the doorway.

"Where are the servants?" he demanded.

"They will all be in the west wing now," she replied wonderingly.

"At the far end of the castle?"

"At the far end of the castle. Why?"

But he was gone, and to her bewilderment she heard the key turned in the lock before his footsteps descending the stone stairs died away in the distance.

Lady Merlyon threw herself upon one of the softly-cushioned couches, and with a little sigh disposed herself to possess her soul in patience until his return; but mingled with her newly-found happiness was a vague sense of disquiet, born of the loneliness of her position and the inexplicable *something* in her lover's manner which had startled her more than once that evening. And as the time crept by, and she pondered upon the strangeness of his words and bearing, this uneasiness grew and increased till she gradually worked herself into a state of nervous tension closely bordering upon panic. She could not

tell the hour. If the clock upon the stables had struck its deep tone had been inaudible to her through the howling of the storm without, and to her overwrought imagination it seemed as though hours must have passed before, to her intense relief, she heard his ascending steps at length. For the past quarter of an hour or more she had been pacing the floor in a fever of impatience, now and then pausing to vainly try the door so mysteriously closed upon her, and now as it turned upon its hinges she flew to meet him on the threshold. But the glad ejaculation died upon her lips and she stopped as if suddenly turned to stone, as after locking the door upon the inner side he removed the key and stood facing her in silence.

His hair was disordered, his clothes were torn and soiled with dust and dirt. From one of his hands, which nervously toyed with the lappel of his coat, blood was slowly dropping, forming dark stains upon the dainty carpet; while his lips, from which no sound proceeded, were moving rapidly as though in unceasing speech. For a few moments they stood facing each other thus, while a deadly terror seemed to grip her heart with icy fingers and root her to the spot unable to speak or stir. Then on her ears fell the discord of a low mocking laugh, and as the ghastly horror of the truth burst upon her she swayed where she stood, and, with a stifled cry that forced itself from her pale lips, swooned and fell a disordered heap upon the floor. For from the glittering eyes fixed upon her the light of reason had fled for ever, and the distorted face on which she looked was that of a maniac!

When she began to regain consciousness it was with a sensation of intense cold and wetness, and as her benumbed faculties reasserted themselves and, raising herself upon her elbow, she opened her eyes and felt gropingly around her she became aware that she was lying on cold dripping stone. For a second she wondered vaguely where she was and what had happened. Then as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, the full horror of her situation dawned upon her, and with a shuddering moan she covered her face with her hands and sank down again in a breathless agony of fright. She was on the roof of the tower, and within a yard of her stood the tall figure of Merlyon with folded arms, gazing out into the blackness of the night. Above and all around was a veil of dense impenetrable gloom, filled with hurrying beating-sleet. A wild night! A bitter blustering night! The fierce:

wind howled and screamed around the old grey walls, beating against them with a mad, noisy impotence, dying now and again into a baffled, mournful wail, during which the ceaseless rush and patter of the driving sleet could be distinctly heard, only to rise once more with a fresh gust of fury to shatter itself against the stubborn stones—a pitiless cruel night! And exposed to all its violence—with the icy drops beating upon her unprotected neck and arms, cutting them like a knife; with her rich thin dress soaked and clinging to her delicate limbs; her golden hair all sodden and dishevelled—crouched the fair woman, lately the mistress of all the wide domain, quivering in every nerve with terror and scarce daring to breathe. But her first slight movement had attracted the attention of the man who stood beside her muttering incoherently to himself, his disordered brain forgetful of her for the moment. He turned and, bending, raised her half fainting to her feet with all the tenderness of the days gone by, pressing his burning lips to her cold cheek.

And now through the darkness a faint glow began to creep about them, and as she hung drooping within his encircling arm she wondered listlessly, feebly, whether she could have lain unconscious through all the hours of that night, and if the blessed dawn could really be at hand. But even as the half-formed hope passed through her mind the deep voice of the clock solemnly rang forth with one sonorous stroke. Yet the light grew and grew, and the windows of the central buildings shone as though lit up by a midnight sun, till suddenly—ere her confused brain had grasped its dreadful significance—from window and balcony, from loophole and turret door, from a dozen different places in the dark mass of building that lay sleeping below and around poured dense cloud upon cloud that rivalled the blackness of the starless heavens above, and in their midst hurrying, leaping tongues and spurts of ravenous flame which licked the walls and streamed aloft in reckless defiance of the downpouring of the sky. And then high above the clanging of the hastily wakened alarm bell, carrying its dread tidings to all the country round; the faintly distinguishable screams of women, and all the tumult of the panic-stricken household; above even the clamour of the wind and hissing of the fire rose the voice of the madman, on whose breast Lady Merlyon lay, as he shouted aloud in delirious ecstasy at the sight of his handiwork: “Sylvia, my darling! my life! Will they not

remember the night of our betrothal now? Look! look at the glancing flames, the dancing merry flames! Are they not glorious, my Sylvia! Glorious leaping flames! See how they dance to wards us! Can you feel their hot breath upon your cheek, sweet? See how they stretch out their arms to us with their yellow hair streaming on the wind! I love them! I love them! They told me that you were false to me, my love; that your lips were lying, treacherous; that you loved gold, sordid gold, better than yourself! But the flames have told me, No! They whispered to me that it was a lie—a base, cruel lie! That they were trying to take you from me, my heart's delight! And I believed them, Sylvia, and they spoke to me of love, of the passion of my life and of a state of perfect happiness for you and I! You and I! Never to part again. Never! Never! Never!"

She had slipped down on to her knees now, and was kneeling there clinging to him mechanically, with all her failing strength; and for a time he grew quieter. Stooping, he smoothed the damp disordered hair tenderly back from her forehead with a slow caressing touch, and kissed the upturned face, white and drawn in the fitful glow, once, twice, thrice, almost reverently, on lips and eyes and brow; then as a fresh burst of glittering sparks swept up around and over them, his frenzy returned a hundredfold and, uttering a hoarse cry of triumph, he tore himself from her detaining hands, and with one bound was standing on the parapet. For a second he remained erect, his tall figure clad in evening dress standing out black and clearly defined against the crimson background, then, with a hurried glance at the drooping figure behind him, bent forward with outstretched arms as though to embrace the tongues of fire that leapt towards him as he swayed backwards and forwards on the very brink. The intense horror of the moment broke the spell of stupefaction that had held her motionless, almost senseless. With a wild shriek of "Vivian! Vivian!" she sprang to her feet and towards him, but only to dash herself against the battlemented parapet and sink bruised and fainting on the unyielding stone; for even as her outstretched hands touched him, with an unearthly peal of laughter he drew himself up to his full height for an instant, then with a mad leap into the air plunged into the flaming mass below.

When in the twilight of that Christmas Day the willing, help-

ing hands from all the country round were able at last to break in the heat-cracked and warped oaken door, and effect an entrance into the grim old grey tower that stood blackened and scarred with smoke and flame looking down in its massive strength upon the desolation at its feet, they found a slender black-robed figure, prone face downwards upon the threshold, the small white hands torn and bleeding with their frenzied beating against the stubborn barrier.

Stanmoulton Castle still stands, a blackened skeleton, through whose sightless eyes the wind whistles and the bat wings his noiseless twilight flight; and day by day among the rank luxuriant weeds that have grown and thriven apace wanders a sad-faced woman with widow's crape upon her golden hair, and in her weary tearless eyes the misery of an unfathomable remorse.

GEORGE CALVERT.

The Story of Junia.

By MRS. CHARLES PERRIN.

I AM a woman with strong nerves, by which I mean that I hardly know of the existence of such things. I never go into hysterics or get cold feelings down my back when I hear an "authenticated" ghost-story, neither am I afraid to go to bed after I *have* heard it, and I never had a presentiment or a dream that came true in my life, which is saying a good deal!

In fact I am entirely free from superstition or belief in the supernatural, so that it may be clearly understood that I am a most matter-of-fact person, and that with this kind of temperament it is not likely that I could have invented the following story in case any one should imagine that I had done so.

One morning, at the beginning of last cold weather, I received a letter from a Mrs. Pollock, a great friend of mine, whose husband was an irrigation officer in the Punjab, begging me to go and pay her a very long-promised visit.

"Harry is going into camp for a month," she wrote, "and I have been so seedy lately that he thinks I had better not go too, so *do* come and stay with me like a dear creature, for I shall be all alone except for my little Dot. This is a hideously dull place, hardly any people, but I know you don't mind that sort of thing."

I showed the letter to my brother Jack, for whom I have kept house during the last five years, and asked him what I should do.

"I think you had better go," he answered, "she really seems to want you, and she's been very kind ever since you came out, so I think it's the least you can do, only I'm afraid it's a beastly journey for you."

"Oh! I don't mind that, if you're sure you'll be all right alone."

Jack burst out laughing in a rude school-boyish way:

"What do you think will happen to me?" he asked.

"Why, you know very well; you always say everything goes wrong when I'm away, that all your food tastes of *ghee* or onions, and you get the same dinner every night, which is entirely your own fault for——"

But Jack was stopping up his ears and making faces at me, so I ceased wasting my breath and retired to write and tell Mary Pollock I would be with her in a week, arranging to arrive on the day her husband was to go into camp.

It was indeed, as Jack had prophesied, "a beastly journey," and I arrived at L—— utterly worn out at about five o'clock in the evening.

Mary was on the platform of the station and received me delightedly.

"Oh! you dear old thing, you're not a bit altered," she cried, which was a fact I did not consider remarkable, as it was little more than a year since she had seen me last!

"You wait till I've had a bath," I replied; "the dust has filled up all the new wrinkles and my hat hides my grey hair!"

A bamboo cart was waiting outside, into which we climbed and were soon bowling along the hard white road at a brisk pace.

"I'm longing for you to see Dot," said Mary; "she's grown awfully since you saw her, and she can walk by herself and say lots of little words!"

"Well, my dear Mary, it would be rather odd if she hadn't grown," I said, laughing, "considering she was only about eight months old when I saw her last—a year ago."

"Yes, it would," admitted Mary gravely, "but you know she grows *awfully* fast, much faster than other children; my ayah says she never saw such a child."

Now I must confess that I am not fond of children." I like them very well in their place (if it is not near me), but I never know how to behave towards them if I am called upon to notice them, and am always in terror of what they are going to say next. Therefore, fond as I was of Mary herself, the subject of her conversation did not particularly interest me.

"I've got *such* a good ayah," went on Mary, "the best I have ever come across. I got her quite by chance. You remember Mrs. Grogge? Well, she wrote to Mrs. Brown, who wanted an ayah, and then——"

But happily at this point in the narrative we pulled up in front of Mary's house. "Oh! here we are," she said. "Well, I must tell you the rest another time."

When we were in the drawing-room she inquired if I would rather see Dot first or have some tea.

"I should like some tea," I replied boldly, for I was exceedingly tired and thirsty, and I reflected with much sagacity that if I did not at once make a stand, I should be ridden over roughshod by "Dot" for the remainder of my visit.

After tea I was taken to my room and then Mary went to fetch Dot for exhibition. She carried the child in her arms, and for once my prejudices melted away.

She was the most lovely little girl I had ever seen in my life, with a grave sweet face that quite won my unmotherly heart.

"You little darling!" I exclaimed in spite of myself, and Mary put her into my arms in an ecstasy of delight.

I tapped the pincushion, and shook my keys, and went through various other idiotic antics in my endeavours to amuse Dot, who I felt sure would set up a howl in a minute or two. But she watched my foolish attempts to be amusing with a gravity that was most embarrassing, and taken though I was with the little creature, I was relieved when she held out her arms to go back to her mother.

"Here, ayah," called out Mary, "take Dottie babba into the garden."

A woman with a sullen, handsome face entered and took the child away.

"What a horrid-looking creature!" I remarked. "Is that the ayah you told me about? I'm sure she has a fiendish temper."

"Indeed she's most gentle with Dot," said Mary, a little put

out. "I would trust the child anywhere with her ; she has got rather a temper, but all ayahs are the same, and as long as she's kind and nice to Dot I don't care how many tempers she has."

I saw I had vexed Mary by my thoughtless remark, so said no more on the subject, reflecting that I knew little or nothing about ayahs at all, and whether this particular one had a temper or not did not affect me in the least, so long as Mary herself was satisfied with her.

The next morning I was awakened by feeling a soft little pat on my face, and, opening my eyes, I saw Dot standing by my pillow.

"Why, little one, are you all alone?" I said, lifting her up on to the bed, and then I discovered that her feet were dripping with water.

"Oh, Dot! where *have* you been?" I exclaimed. She lifted one wet little foot and examined it carefully and then pointed to the bath-room door, which was open, and from where I lay I could see an overturned *gurrah* with streams of water on the floor, evidently Dot's handiwork.

I put on my dressing gown and took the child into her mother.

"Mary, here's Dot with her feet quite wet; she must have been playing with water in my bath-room for ages. What can the ayah have been about?"

"Oh! good gracious! She'll catch her death," cried Mary, frantically pulling off the little shoes and stockings and calling for the ayah, who presently came in and stood silently watching her mistress.

"What do you mean by leaving the child like this?" exclaimed Mary angrily, and taking Dot's shoes and stockings she threw them to the ayah, telling her to fetch dry ones. One of the little shoes struck the ayah on the cheek, for Mary was very much annoyed, and had flung them with more force than was necessary.

Never shall I forget the look on that woman's face, it was literally the countenance of a devil; but Mary did not notice it, for she was busy chaffing the tiny pink feet in her hands.

"Mary," I said, "I can't help it, but that woman is a perfect brute; do get rid of her. I never saw such a look as she gave you just now."

"My dear," answered Mary good-humouredly, "you've taken a dislike to Junia and imagine these things. She knew she had

done wrong and was ashamed of herself. It's the first time such a thing has happened, so I shan't say anything more to her about it."

So the matter dropped, but I could not get over my dislike to Junia, and as my visit wore on and I got fonder and fonder of dear little Dot, I could hardly bear to see the child in her presence.

My month with Mary passed very quickly and I was really sorry when my visit was over and I had to go home. I missed Dot terribly when I got back, more especially as soon after I returned Jack was obliged to go away for a few days on business, and I was left alone. I had become ridiculously fond of that little round ball of humanity calling itself Dot, with the great dark eyes and short yellow curls, and I shall never forget my feelings when the news came, in the shape of a letter from Mr. Pollock, to say they had lost their only child for ever.

I read and re-read the letter over and over again. It was so terribly sudden. I had only left Mary and Dot five days ago, and my mind went back to the morning I started, when I left Mary on the platform with the baby in her arms, who was kissing her little fat hands laboriously to me and looking the picture of life and health.

Poor Mr. Pollock wrote in a heart-broken strain. It appeared that the child had strayed away one afternoon and must have fallen into the river, which ran past the bottom of the garden, for the tiny *sola topee* was picked up not very far down, and close to the water's edge was a toy the child had been playing with all day.

"There seems no doubt that she must have fallen in," wrote Mr. Pollock, "for though *everything* has been done to find her, we have been unsuccessful; as you know, in these rivers a body is very seldom recovered. My poor wife is almost out of her mind with grief, and I have telegraphed for leave, as I mean to take her home at once. The ayah Junia, whom you must have seen while you were here, was away on three days' leave when it happened, or, as Mary says, it never would have occurred at all, and my wife has begged me to ask you if you will take her on, for she cannot bear the idea of any one who has had so much to do with our darling; going to a stranger. The woman has seemed a really faithful creature, though I believe she has faults,

and she is quite dumb with grief. Of course do as you like about taking her, but if you could humour Mary in this fancy I should be extremely grateful. We shall be starting as soon as I get the sanction to my application for leave, so let me know as soon as you can whether you will take her or not."

I cried bitterly when I once realized that the dreadful news was true. Poor little Dot! I shuddered at the sentence in Mr. Pollock's letter—"in these rivers a body is very seldom recovered"—for I knew full well what he meant. Many a time I had stood looking out across the shallow water with Dot in my arms, trying to make out whether the dark points sticking out of the river were pieces of stick or weed, until they disappeared or the huge ugly head of an alligator rose to the surface for a second.

I wired at once that I would take Junia willingly. I forgot my old dislike of her, and only remembered that I should have somebody with me who had known and loved Dot well. Poor woman! In spite of her peculiar temper she had tended her little charge very carefully, and I felt an intense pity for her, as I imagined what her feelings must have been when she returned from her short holiday and found that the child she had nursed and cared for as if it had been her own was gone for ever.

When she arrived I was quite shocked by her altered appearance; her face seemed to have shrunk to half its usual size and her eyes looked enormous and shone with a strange brilliancy. She was very quiet, but burst into a flood of tears when I tried to talk to her of poor little Dot, so I gave it up, as I saw she could hardly bear the subject mentioned.

I felt very low-spirited the night Junia came. Jack had written to say he was obliged to stay away a week longer than he had at first intended, so I had a weary time before me alone.

When I was going to bed Junia came into my room and stood looking at me without speaking.

"What is it?" I asked.

"*Memsahib*, may I sleep in your dressing room to-night?" she said in a whisper, looking over her shoulder.

"Certainly," I replied. I saw the woman's nerves were overstrung and she needed companionship, or I should have refused her request, as I particularly dislike an ayah sleeping anywhere near me.

I must have been asleep after this for about three hours, when I awoke in the middle of a strange dream. I thought I was in a blinding storm of rain, and that a child's voice was calling to me from the darkness for help.

I opened my eyes with a start. I thought I was not thoroughly awake, for the child's shrill voice was still ringing in my ears; it seemed to die away at last, and I lay down with the first feeling of unaccountable nervousness I had ever experienced creeping over me.

I could not lie still, and was thinking of lighting a candle and reading myself to sleep, when I heard a faint sound outside in the verandah; it was a very low wailing cry, and it seemed to come from close to my dressing-room door. I listened intently till the cry came again; it was certainly a child's voice, and the awful pleading and supplication expressed in the despairing little sound was more than I could stand. I was sure some native baby must have wandered into my verandah and was crying helplessly for its mother.

I lit the candle and went into my dressing-room, the outer door of which led into the verandah; to my intense astonishment there was Junia, with her head bare and her long black hair streaming in wild disorder, crouching against the door and holding it fast with both her hands, as if she was trying to prevent its being opened from the outside.

"What is the matter, Junia? Whose child is that crying outside?" I asked.

She sprang to her feet and began to arrange her *chuddur* over her head.

"I heard nothing," she answered sullenly. I opened the door and went out into the verandah, but there was nothing to be seen, so I went back to bed, thinking it must have been some animal or perhaps my fancy, and I heard nothing more to disturb me that night.

The next evening I dined out, and on my return, which was rather late, I went straight to my bedroom. As I approached the door I heard some one talking inside. I looked in, the bedroom was empty, but I could see into my dressing-room where a light was burning, and I discovered that the noise was made by Junia, who was kneeling in front of the outer door and beseeching something or somebody to "go away" at the top of her voice.

"Junia, Junia, what are you doing?" I exclaimed. Directly she saw me she came towards me excitedly.

"Oh, *memsahib*! tell her to go away," she almost shrieked.

"Tell who?" I demanded.

"Dottie babba," she moaned, wringing her hands; "she cries to come to me; listen to her, listen!"

She held her breath and waited, and I solemnly declare that as I stood face to face with that unhappy woman, and listened as she told me to, I heard a child crying and wailing on the other side of the door. I stood mute with surprise while the plaintive wail rose and fell, until I could stand it no longer, and flinging the door open, I stood with the candle held high above my head.

There was no need of a candle, it was a lovely moonlight night and everything was as clear as daylight, but there was no child anywhere and the verandah was quite empty.

I made up my mind to sift the matter to the bottom, so I went to the servants' houses and called them all up.

"Whose child has been crying?" I asked. "I am not angry about it, I only want to know."

"Mine are the only children here at all," said the khansamah, "and they are big children and sound asleep; only the syces have some small children, and they are too far away for you to hear them cry."

"Perhaps one of them has strayed over here," I said; "search all round the house."

But no child, or trace of any child, was found, so I returned to my verandah, where I saw Junia in a most excited state, so much so that I feared she was going out of her mind.

"*Memsahib*, will she go away if I tell you everything?" she asked, clinching her hands, and her eyes almost starting from her head.

"Yes, yes," I said soothingly; "tell me what you like."

She silently took my wrist and dragged me out into the bright moonlight.

"Sit down," she whispered; "now we can see her if she comes."

I felt I was in the presence of a mad woman, so I quietly sat down on a large stone and waited.

She began to walk round me, speaking in a kind of chant.

"I did it," she said; "I killed the child, little Dottie babba; she has followed me ever since, you heard her cry yourself. The *memsahib* angered me the day she struck me with the shoe, and then a devil entered into my heart. I asked for leave, as I meant to go to a holy man and have it cast out, but it was too strong for me, it made me come back and it kept saying '*Kill, kill,*' and I knew it would never leave me till I had done what it wanted. Oh! I tried to keep away. I fought and struggled against it, but I knew I must give way; so on the second day of my leave I crept back and hid among the bushes till I saw the child alone, and then I took her away and I killed her. She was so glad to see me at first, and laughed and talked, and then when she saw the devil in my eyes she grew frightened and cried, just as you heard her cry last night and to-night. Then I took her little white throat in my strong hands—see, *memsahib*, how large and strong they are—and I pressed and pressed like *this*, until the child was dead—and then the devil left me. I looked at her and saw what I had done and I could not unclasp her hands from my *chuddur*, they held it so tightly, so I had to take it off, and I wrapped her in it——"

The woman stopped suddenly. I had listened in silence up till then, repressing the exclamations of horror that rose to my lips as I heard the ghastly confession.

"What did you do then?" I asked, digging my nails into the palms of my hands in my efforts to keep calm.

Junia pressed her hands to her forehead. "I forget," she murmured—"I did something near the water—I was very quick, I——." There was a shriek from the dry parched lips, and flinging her arms above her head, she fell at my feet unconscious and foaming at the mouth.

I called aloud for help, and presently the servants heard me and came running to the spot.

I sent one of them for the doctor, who lived near, and in the meantime I had a charpoy brought and the unconscious figure laid on it.

Very little remains to be told. On examination Junia was found to be raving mad, and the doctor expressed his opinion that she must have been in a more or less dangerous state for some months past. I told him of her horrible confession to me in the moonlight, and he said that very probably the whole

story was a pure delusion on her part. However this may be, I am firmly convinced that what the woman told me was true, and I cannot overcome the idea that the cause of my thinking so is the fact of my having heard the cries I have described on those two consecutive nights.

I will not say that I actually believe it was the spirit of little Dot that I heard, and yet—what was it?

I went to see Junia once after she was placed under restraint and the sight saddened me so that I never went again. She was seated on the floor patting an imaginary child to sleep, crooning the queer little lullaby that ayahs always use, and when I spoke to her she only looked at me with wild vacant eyes and continued her monotonous little chant as if she had not seen me at all.

The Countess of Broad.

"ATTEND to my instructions," said the countess. "I am out of health and I am no longer young. I may disappear to avoid the noise and tumult and constant ceremonial of life. I may disappear, I say, and my absence may be exceedingly prolonged. But the Countess of Broad will never die, and it will be your part to care for her interests and to keep her estates in as good order as if you hourly expected her return. I intend that immediately after my departure my affairs shall be administered by six trustees. I appoint the original six; as each one dies the remaining five will elect a sixth to fill his place. There will always—everlastingly—be six trustees to the estates of the Earldom of Broad. You understand?"

The man of business looked at her curiously.

"Your ladyship speaks strangely," he said.

"I speak deliberately," returned the countess. "In other families heirs are transmitted, and the family honours go down from parent to child. In this case, it is different; I have no issue. Nevertheless, the Belmaisons will not cease; the Countess of Broad will never die. You thoroughly comprehend my meaning? Through the ages, you and your successors will remember that the Countess of Broad *is*. She may disappear; she cannot cease to exist."

"But——," expostulated the lawyer.

The countess raised her hand.

"Make no demur," said she. "Obey me now, and see that you obey me always. I repeat—the Countess of Broad will never die."

She was a small old lady, very fragile of frame, with delicate features and a soft faded complexion, nearly seventy years of age, but as yet unbent, alert, neither hard of hearing nor dim of sight, nor in any way decrepid, always dressed to a nicety, stately as a queen. She had but one infirmity. Her heart was weak; it beat fitfully, and at times it seemed almost to stop and the countess fainted.

"It is odd that I—who have never loved nor hated—should be affected thus," she said one day to her physician.

But the countess had fostered one strong passion and it had overwhelmed her, mentally and physically. She had sought to make her great name greater, and her ambition had been foiled, and the disappointment had laid an icy hand upon her heart.

The countess confided her secret to no one, and outwardly she preserved an entirely impassive demeanour. She wore none of the external signs of cardialgia. She was never hurried, never irritable; no one had ever heard her speak quickly or angrily; no one had ever seen her make an impatient movement, even with her lips.

Great people do not exhibit their feelings, and the Countess of Broad was very great. She had lived in regal state all her life, and she sustained it now, though she was old and her heart was feeble. She had ladies and gentlemen in waiting; she held daily audiences; her dressing and undressing were solemnities; she dined apart, in an inner room, passing to her table between two rows of ladies and gentlemen, who courtesied and bowed as she stepped through them; an outrider preceded her when she drove forth, and four horses drew her carriage; bells were rung on her birthday, and when she assembled her neighbours to a ball or a garden-party, it was announced in the local papers that the Countess of Broad had given an entertainment and that she had been gracious. The countess, indeed, was condescending to all, —to peasant and to peer alike. But she gave her friendship to none, and it is questionable whether she would not have stood aloof and superior in a gathering of emperors. For she con-

sidered that no family in Europe, crowned or uncrowned, could equal, in point of lineage, the proud and ancient house of Belmaison, of which—in unbroken succession—she was the last survivor.

She had been born a countess. Her father, the thirty-first Earl of Broad, had died in the hunting field one January day, and at Easter his young widow had brought a daughter into the world, and had herself yielded up the ghost. The earl and countess had both been only children, and there were none to treat the baby-countess with familiarity. There was no man or woman to call her *Psyche*; she was "my lady" to all the world. But she felt no constraint. From her earliest years she was an unchildish child. She would not look at dolls; she would not run with a hoop or play with a ball. Once, when another noble child was introduced into her nursery, and it was hoped that the little creatures would devise some mirthful game between them, the Countess of Broad—after surveying her companion seriously for a whole minute—said to her nurse in a low tone, "Lady Margaret stands on one foot and puts her finger in her mouth. Send her home." After that, the countess's guardians made no more efforts to incite their ward to juvenile pastimes. Instead, they gave her good governesses, and she learned readily. But out of school hours, her little ladyship would not read fairy-tales, and what she liked best was the great volume of the *Annals of the Belmaisons*, collected by the rector of the parish. Over this she pored.

"There must be other great Belmaisons," she said to her governess. "The name must never become obscure. My sons and my grandsons must be famous men."

I daresay the governess smiled in her sleeve. Little girls of ten or twelve years old do not usually talk, in assured tones, of their children and their children's children. But the Countess of Broad was altogether different from other little girls. One might have supposed that to be born a countess was to be born at the age of fifty. For the Countess of Broad, who never ran or jumped, or danced a valse or sang a merry song, or was excited at the play, or enthusiastic over any grand sight or eager for any amusement, was preternaturally wise, and when she was fifteen, could give advice and organize plans and reason and form judgments better than most men at thirty. I suppose that if she had

not been a countess she would have been a prig. I do not know if the two things are compatible. Certainly, no one suggested the possibility when the countess gave sage counsels to young ladies about to be married as to how they should behave to their husbands, nor even when she dictated to the gamekeeper's wife how to bring up her eighth baby ; what the countess said in each case was unanswerably sensible ; she never spoke ignorantly ; if she had not had a justly-formed opinion to give, she would not have spoken at all. But counsel sounded strange from such young lips. One does not expect an infant in arms to tell us how soon the elder children are to discard bibs and commence the study of Latin. The small countess, however, stood quite alone in the world. She was an unique personage.

Quite early in life she ascertained her own limits exactly. She discovered that she could assimilate readily and organize with facility, but that she could originate nothing. This, however, did not distress her. She was descended from a long line of illustrious warriors and statesmen, and she resolved that she would be the ancestress of as long and as distinguished a line. Psyche, Countess of Broad, should be the mother and the grandmother of great men. It was sufficient that she should hand on the tradition of greatness, that she should transmit the name and fame of Belmaison to the generations to come. She had no personal ambition ; all her individuality was merged in family feeling. The Belmaisons had been great, and it was her place in creation to continue their greatness ; she must be the link between the superb position that had been and the superb position that would be ; and that she would be this link she determined absolutely. So she planned her future—as her maidens combed her long hair, as she paced the picture-gallery in the twilight, as she rode out, bowing to her tenants, and followed at a respectful distance by a couple of grooms.

The countess chose to keep close at her studies till she was eighteen, and till her learning was prodigious ; then she made her *début*, taking heed to all the details of it, as if she had been her own parent. She went up to London, opened her fine house in St. James's Park, and was presented at court. Immediately she was in the highest society. The whole aristocracy welcomed her ; she went everywhere and knew every one. The sedate and lovely young countess was the rage. She was also the great matri-

monial prize of the season, and she received many offers. Amongst others, the Duke of Bombay pressed his suit, and the countess's guardians were urgent that his proposal should be accepted. But the Countess of Broad disdained a modern dukedom. Had not the Belmaisons been earls when the progenitors of the Duke of Bombay were massed among the common herd?

"But the duke is a great man now, and he is young and rich and very clever," said one of her guardians.

"And do you think I would merge my family in his?" said the countess slowly. "No. I was born Countess of Broad and Countess of Broad I will live, and my son shall be the Earl of Broad. I will marry no man whose rank surpasses mine."

So she presently accepted a younger son of a certain noble family, and in the late summer the Honourable Algernon Banstead became the husband of the Countess of Broad. I do not know if the husband and wife were happy; if they were they kept their happiness for private use; if they were not they did not say so. At any rate, whether their state was happy or the reverse it was brief. Before she was twenty the Countess of Broad was a widow! She was also childless.

She bore her affliction without a murmur; she shut herself up for a week or so and then reappeared in crape—not smiling, for she never smiled, but equable, as usual. She mourned in the country for a year, then she put on grey satin and went to London. She was now of age, and her guardians took leave of her. They had no misgivings that she would squander her money or spoil her inheritance or marry a rake. She had none of the follies of youth, and more than the ordinary sagacity of age. She had planned her own excellent education and selected her masters; she had chosen her associates before she was introduced; she had herself dictated the terms of her marriage settlement, and they had been sensible and clear-witted above the common. It was quite evident that the Countess of Broad required no nursing-fathers.

"I shall marry again, of course," she said to the gentleman who was her only and very remote relation. "It is essential that there should be an heir to the earldom."

She carried out her intention soon. She had cast away her black when the roses began to bloom, and before the corn was cut she had put aside her grey dresses and had decked herself

once more as a bride. This time a rich and well-connected commoner became her husband, and Mr. Rochefort and the Countess of Broad signed themselves the affectionate husband and wife of the other for eight uneventful years. But still no nursery was required at Belmaison and still the countess had not fulfilled her mission.

When her second husband died she gave no sign of suffering. As she had done before, she secluded herself at Belmaison, and as before, when a twelvemonth had gone by she reappeared in society, habited in grey.

I am not sure that if the widow had been plain Mrs. Smith, people might not have giggled vulgarly and perhaps made rude remarks about people being on the look out again. But, for some puzzling and curious reason, no one ever laughed at the Countess of Broad ; it seemed almost as if her dignity were too tangible to be assailed by uncouth witticisms ; one would as soon have ridiculed a star or a snow-storm as make fun of this magnificent little creature, whose famous sons and grandsons were still unborn. But motherly women and men who had lands and titles to bequeath to posterity, pitied her, and they pitied her the more because she would not be approached by the faintest vestige of sympathy. The countess, indeed, told no one that she was disappointed ; she was always calm and impassive. But shrewd people guessed that she was mortified, and it was about this time that she betrayed to an acute physician that she was anxious and troubled, notwithstanding her cold exterior, by fainting.

It is needless to say that she married a third time ; again she wedded a commoner ; a certain Mr. Raban succeeded to the consortship which had been already held by the Honourable Algernon Banstead and Mr. Rochefort. After that, the years rolled on and other young people came to the front and married and had children. But no son or daughter came to Belmaison. The Countess of Broad had no heir.

Some childless women interest themselves in the little ones of others ; they see much of the children of their friends ; perhaps they adopt one out of a cousin's baker's dozen ; they give school-feasts, they visit ragged-schools, they provide seaside treats and country holidays for youngsters who live in dingy courts and never dig in the sand or gather spring flowers. But the Countess

of Broad did none of these things ; she had no love for children ; it was the heir of Belmaison that she longed for. It was not motherhood that she yearned after, but the perpetuation of her race. As she grew older she came to feel that if she died—when she died—there would be a great loss to the world because her name would be extinct. When she drove out, alone and silent, with the outrider ahead of her, she used to try and pierce the future—she used to imagine herself dead and try and picture what England would be—what Europe would be—without her. And she could not imagine it ; it seemed to her that society must fall to pieces—that progress must be checked—that civilization must relapse into brutishness—if no Belmaison walked the earth. She dwelt upon this subject till it absorbed her—till she thought of nothing else—till the death of her third husband scarcely caused her any feeling, though he had been courteous to her for twenty-five years and had sometimes called her Psyche. She was nearly sixty now and she frequently swooned ; sometimes when she had been sitting quite silent and undisturbed she would faint. That was when she had been thinking most painfully of the extinction of the Belmaisons ; then corrugated lines gathered on her brow and a fierce look came into her eyes and her lips were tightly pressed together and her hands clenched. Her attendants knew the symptoms of the coming attack, but neither they nor any one knew what caused the symptoms.

Not far from Belmaison there stood a low rocky hill, and soon after Mr. Raban's death, the countess had a grotto hewn out of it, and caused the entrance to be so artfully concealed that no one but herself knew how to find it. There was but one key to this hidden door, which could be unlocked either from within or from without, and this little key the countess wore upon her watch chain. She often visited the grotto and conveyed provisions to it, saying that some wayfarer—some hermit—might perchance force an entrance, and must not, in that case, starve. For beverage, a clear natural well rose in the outer grotto ; for light, the countess ordered oil to be brought and left matches and a lamp always ready—ready for the traveller or the recluse, she said. Naturally, it excited wonder among her people that this woman, who had shed no tear over the biers of three husbands, who had never taken a little child on her knee and kissed it, who had never made a friend or sympathized with the needy or the sor-

rowful, should thus care for the comfort of a possible—but most improbable and vagrant—stranger. It seemed peculiar; but then, this personage who had been born a countess, had always been peculiar.

"She will go mad," some said, as they watched her brooding face, not knowing what she brooded upon, but knowing that all brooding is maddening.

So ten years passed. The old countess did not go to London now. She remained at Belmaison, keeping up great state and exacting indefatigable homage from her household; no empress could have demanded an ampler deference. During these years she mused continually and fainted often. But her ill-health did not alarm her.

"Do not be disturbed," she said sometimes to her ladies, when she had revived after a prolonged swoon and marked their frightened faces. "The Countess of Broad will never die. There will always be the Countess of Broad—long, long after you and your children and your children's children are dead."

Then they marvelled, and believed that she was insane. But she heeded nothing, and sent for her man of business and instructed him to arrange a trusteeship to the Belmaison estate, in case—in case she should disappear.

"I may depart hence, for I need rest," she said, speaking in cold, incisive tones. "But the Countess of Broad will never die."

It was a winter afternoon. The five o'clock tea had been removed, but the countess did not dine till half-past eight, and she would not be disturbed till eight. She had bidden her ladies close the door between the inner room, in which she sat, and the outer room, which was theirs, and they obeyed her, half relieved to get away from her stately and blighting presence, half fearful lest she should faint and they not be at hand to tend her.

"What was that?" exclaimed Miss Grey, half-an-hour later.

"Nothing—nothing," returned Miss Clarence. "You are always so nervous, Emily."

"It was like a window being opened."

"Very likely. In the room overhead."

"But it sounded so near. Shall I just ask if the countess called?"

"No, no! She would only be annoyed. She would ring if

she wanted us, and certainly she did not ring. Do listen, Emily. I want so to tell you what Edward said."

Miss Grey, however, had been right. A window had been opened, and that close at hand—in the next room, where the countess sat.

When the ladies had withdrawn, the countess arose and went to the window, and, drawing aside the thick curtains, looked out. It was half-past five in the afternoon of the shortest day, and it would have been quite dark but for the brilliance of the moon, which was nearly at the full. The whole landscape lay white and silent, frost-bound and moon-lit. The window opened on to a balcony, and from the balcony a flight of steps led down into the flower garden, whence a winding shrubbery took its way to the countess's grotto.

The small old countess stood for some minutes looking out. Then she opened the window gently. It answered her touch easily; machinery at Belmaison was always perfect. There was no wind, but a rush of cold air entered the warm apartment and seemed to embrace the countess. Frigid as she always was, she shivered, and, raising her lace shawl above her head, she wrapped it closer round her shoulders. She stood there for a few moments as if hesitating—looking back half regretfully at the bright fire, the shaded lamp, the easy-chair, the vase of hot-house flowers, the new book laid ready to her hand; she even drew away from the window apace. Then her eye caught the eye—seemingly reproachful—of her grandfather, the thirtieth earl, whose portrait hung opposite. *He* had left a son to inherit and hand on the name and fame of Belmaison, and *she*——.

"Yes, yes," she muttered bitterly. "I have failed to give life, but at least I can defeat death. The Belmaisons must never die."

Then she stepped hurriedly on to the balcony, descended the steps and sped lightly across the garden and into the shrubbery. She vanished, and none saw the Countess of Broad disappear. Only Miss Grey presently shivered, for she was delicate, and said that it really did feel as if a window were open close by. But Miss Clarence pooh-poohed the idea.

"Do but listen," she entreated. "Suppose the countess were to ring and I had never told you what Edward said!"

Through the dark shrubbery hastened the countess, taking dainty steps with her beautiful little feet, her heart palpitating a

little—because of its weakness ; not for fear, for the countess knew no fear—her eyes, that had never required spectacles, looking straight before her, her ears awake to every sound. And all the way she went she kept on saying to herself, “ I have no son—no son—no son ! But the Belmaisons must not die—they *shall* not die : there shall be a Countess of Broad for ever—for ever ! ”

She reached the rocky hill and went straight to the secret entrance known only to herself, and she took the little key off her chain and pushed it into the keyhole, and the door flew open. The countess entered quickly and passed easily and with rapid steps into the inner grot, for although all was darkness here, and the moonlight only crept in and lit up a few paces within the doorway, she knew every inch of the place by heart ; and without hesitation she reached the matches and in a few moments had lit the lamp. Then she returned to the entrance, drew the key from the lock and closed the door. It shut to with a little click. Nothing in heaven or earth could open it now but that one old woman who held the key in her little hand. What if she should faint now and sink to the ground and perhaps die for want of restoratives ? She fancied she could hear Miss Grey tapping at her chamber door, and Miss Clarence running to and fro and crying, “ Where—where is the countess ? ”—while she lay here in the silent grot dying—dead—with that key in her hand. What if that should be ? Ah, but that was what must be—that was why she had come here. It did not matter how much Miss Grey should tap, and Miss Clarence call, and the whole household search for her. They might seek till doomsday, but they would never find her. She had disappeared—she had departed this life—she had passed away. But the Countess of Broad would never die, and eternally, according to her arrangements, her trustees would administer her estates. The Countess of Broad might lie in this self-chosen tomb, cold and still ; but the last of the Belmaisons must not—should not—*could* not die.

The grotto was but a small chamber—twelve feet square at the most—and it contained only a table and some writing materials, a couple of chairs and a couch. There was no fireplace and no window. Secret air-holes had been arranged ; but the air thus admitted came feebly, and the place was close. The countess began to breathe quickly and she felt oppressed.

"What is to be done had better be done quickly," she said half aloud.

She seated herself at the table, opened the portfolio and wrote for a few minutes.

"If, centuries hence, an earthquake should rend my tomb, they shall know who I am and why I am here," she murmured.

Then she took the lamp in her hand and went with slow steps to the outer grot and removed a light slab of wood which covered the well. It was a narrow spring, which bubbled up nearly to the floor of the rocky grot, and it was very deep. The countess knew that, and for a moment a spasm of pain crossed her face. She paused, thinking. For she alone held the key of the grot. She had it in her hand now and she looked at it almost lovingly. Outside was a world still pleasant—fires and delicate food and obsequious servants, and books, and flowers and horses—and inside was death; and this little key in her hand was all that lay between. But no! *No! Outside* was death and the extinction of the Belmaisons, and inside was the Countess of Broad who had only disappeared—who would never die.

YES!!

There was a little splash. It was the key. The countess had held her hand over the well and then opened her fingers wide.

She stood there alone with death—horrible, lonely death. But O, there was life—life—life—everlasting life—to the Belmaisons!

I think that in this supreme moment the countess laughed exultantly. Then she went back to the inner grot and stretched herself upon the couch. And there she lay, thinking, and with a grand and peaceful smile upon her fine features. The passion of her life had culminated now. She had fulfilled her aim. She had brought forth no son, but, O God be praised! the Belmaisons shall never die!

And then—then—the Countess of Broad closed her eyes and breathed a faint sigh—and—and—did the heart that had never loved or hated, but which would—*would*—immortalize its family—did it cease to beat? Did it?

"I am quite sure the window in the next room is open," said Miss Grey. "I have a feeling that something is wrong, and at all events, it is eight o'clock and I shall go in."

And she knocked and quickly entered, and the apartment was empty and the window on to the balcony open.

They sought the countess high and low, and then they decided that she must have gone to the grot, and they ran thither and searched all night for the secret door, but none could find it, and they shouted and bawled, but none replied ; and in the morning they sent for gunpowder and blasted the rock and rushed in, and they found the well uncovered and the lamp still burning beside it, and in the inner cave lay the countess, with an ineffable smile upon her countenance, dead. And her design was frustrated, for they buried her with great pomp, and the Belmaisons ceased to exist ; and as she had no relations and had left no will, the Belmaison estates lapsed to the Crown.

"Poor old thing, she was mad !" people said.

But they all spoke tenderly of her, because of the words that she had written before she died, and no one said that her life had been unlively.

"After all," said the Prime Minister, "there are grand passions which do not include love, and there are fine ends which are yet neither generous nor philanthropic. Every man and woman is as God made him."

This is what the countess wrote in her dying hour :

"I die. But the Belmaisons shall live. I pass away in secret. But the Belmaisons shall live on in open day. For I have loved my race with a passion that no words can measure, and I would make its name eternal under the heavens. For though Nature has denied me a son, yet have I devised a means to frustrate Nature, and by disappearing to this unknown and undiscoverable sepulchre, I perpetuate my family. I shall breathe my last. But the Countess of Broad will *never* die, and for thousands and tens of thousands of years the Belmaisons will live on. I have arrested time. I have taken the future into the hollow of my hand and I have crystallized it. I, the woman who has borne no son, may depart. But the Countess of Broad will never die.

"PSYCHE BELMAISON,

"32nd Earl of Broad."

FAYR MADOC.

"For the Child's Sake."

By DAISY PENDER CUDLIP,
Author of "ATTACHED TO THE REGIMENT."

"WELL, nurse, how is Master Jack this evening?"

"He seems not quite so well, my lady. He gets very excited at times, then it's all I can do to keep him in bed. He keeps on saying that some cruel 'captain man' is going to steal his mamma, and he must go and save her; in fact, he gets quite delirious at times."

The tall golden-haired woman in evening dress, to whom this remark was addressed, flushed ever so slightly, but laughing lightly she said:

"What nonsense the child talks. Of course he gets excited. You should not let him read so much. It all comes of his reading those impossible tales of adventure; they excite his brain, and give him all kinds of queer fancies."

"He always was an excitable child, poor lamb; but he suffers so patiently. You will go and kiss him good night before you go, my lady? He begged me to tell you that he wanted to see his lovely mamma before she went out."

"Oh yes, of course I will. Sir Hubert is not going with me to-night, so he will be able to relieve you presently; but I told him I did not see any necessity for my staying at home as well because Jack is poorly. I should not be of any use, and it is not as if it were anything serious. Sir Hubert does make such a ridiculous fuss about that child."

Lovely Lady Arnold swept into the dimly-lighted inner room, in which her little son lay suffering, glancing at her own reflection in the glass as she passed. A young woman, married to a man a good deal older than herself, she had never really cared for her husband, but had married him for a title and a comfortable home, and for this had thrown over a man who really loved her, and whom she loved as much as it was possible for a nature like hers to love anybody besides herself. This man, Harry Lander, was a poor man, of course, a subaltern in the army. They had known each other since the time they were boy and girl together, and as time went on had drifted into an engagement that was eventually to

end in marriage when better days turned up, those better days being when he, the penniless subaltern, should succeed to the family title and estates, the then present baronet being a very old man and his father's half-brother. His father being dead and his uncle being childless, he, Harry Lander, was the next heir. In the meantime, however, Sir Hubert Arnold appeared on the scenes, fell in love with the beautiful Rose Lancaster, and offered himself and his wealth, not knowing she was engaged to this other man. She accepted him, and never let him know that she was so pledged. Married him; and then wrote out to Aden to inform Harry Lander that he must forget her, giving as the excuse for her conduct the indefiniteness of their engagement, and pointing out that "a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush;" at least that was what her argument literally came to. Harry Lander never answered that letter, but he did not forget the woman who had so wronged him, nor yet did he cease to love her.

Rose was not happy in her marriage. She had never cared for her husband, and when her child was born she was jealous of the love her husband gave to him, and came almost to dislike the boy as he grew older. When, however, it was discovered that his spine was injured, evidently from some fall when an infant, and would in all probability be a cripple for the rest of his life, Lady Arnold positively disliked the child, who could never be anything but a burden and a reproach to her. As time went on little Jack grew worse instead of better, in spite of the unremitting care and attention which his doting father lavished on him; and now, on this particular day, he was really very ill, although his mother would not acknowledge the fact, as it would interfere with her plans, for on this night Harry Lander was to meet her at a big ball. He had returned from Aden about two years before, and their intercourse had been incessant ever since. He was now a captain, having recently got his company, and, moreover, had come into his kingdom; and *she* liked having this man to dance attendance on her, to the evident annoyance of her husband, who, although he did not know about the relations which formerly existed between them, yet suspected something of the sort. At the same time he never for one moment doubted but that his honour would be perfectly safe in his wife's keeping, and was blind to many things that otherwise might have enlightened him—however——

Having reached little Jack's bedside, Lady Arnold bent over and gave her little son a cold kiss on his forehead, and, without a word, was turning to go, when the little fellow put out his arms and drew her golden head down towards him.

"Tiss, mamma ; let Jackie tiss oo propley," he said, and suiting the action to the word, he gave her a vehement hug and showered kisses on her face. "Now I'm like other little childrens who tiss their mammas, and no one can say I'm not, can they? May I always tiss oo like that? You such a soft pretty face," proceeding to stroke her face with his hot little hand.

"Take care, Jackie, you're crumpling all my flowers, and your fingers are so sticky. Let mother go, there's a good boy, and turn round and go to sleep."

A flush of disappointment spread over the child's face and the corners of his mouth drooped ominously, and turning on his pillow he gave a little gulp, which he tried hard to suppress, and the tears trickled slowly between his fingers. But Lady Arnold neither heard nor saw ; she had gone over to the glass, and was rearranging the flowers on her dress, and giving a touch here and there to the feathery golden hair.

Just at that moment Sir Hubert came into the room. "What, you here, Rose? I thought you had gone half-an-hour ago."

"No ; I just came up to say good night to the child. Nurse asked me just to look in at him before I went, so I came."

Sir Hubert came up to her with out-stretched hands, his whole face radiant. It was a small thing she had done, and what any other mother would have done as a matter of course ; but this was the first time his wife had ever done such a thing, and to his mind it seemed a beginning of better things for them all.

"Rose! don't go to-night ; don't you see how feverish and ill the child is? Be a real mother to him for once. Can you resist his appeal? See, he is holding out his little arms to you."

For one moment she wavered, her heart *was* touched by the mute appeal ; the next she laughed, and turning on her heel, swept out of the room, trailing her rich white draperies after her.

Sir Hubert knew his wife did not care for their child, but he had hoped that one day she would learn to love the little fellow, who, in spite of her neglect, looked upon her as an angel. "His winning ways must win her in time," he thought, and this even-

ing, seeing his wife bending over the cot, he thought that time had come, and it was a bitter blow to him to find he was mistaken.

"Jackie so tired, daddy. Mamma loves Jackie, I know she does; she let me hug her so tight. Jackie so sorry he crushed the flowers; will mamma forgive me if I say I'm sorry?—I so sorry and so tired. Shall I say my prayers to you, daddy, and go to sleep?" And closing his eyes and folding his little hands together he began:

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
'Ook upon a 'ittle child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to Thee. Amen."

"I too tired to say the rest. Will God be angry with me? You tell Him I so very tired, then He'll know it's not 'cos I'se naughty."

"Very well, Jackie, dear; but God will know all about it. He knows you feel tired, and He loves you, so He will not be angry with you."

"God loves me, daddy loves me, and I know mamma loves me too. I'se so happy. Good night, daddy dear. What oo crying for? Nurse says men never cry, 'cos it's not brave."

"Jackie, you're too young to understand. Why, sometimes even strong, brave men cry. Daddy's rather unhappy, but you must kiss those tears away. Kiss the tears away, then it will be all right, my dear little son," and Sir Hubert bent down over the cot and kissed the child passionately. He sat there for a long time until the more regular breathing told that the little sufferer was asleep Meanwhile Lady Arnold had gone off to the ball, where her beauty, vivacity and grace as usual shone pre-eminent.

"So sorry your husband could not come to-night, Lady Arnold," said her hostess with the old familiar society smile and fib. As a matter of fact, of course she did not care in the least, so Lady Arnold need not have attempted to explain his absence, which she did by saying:

"Yes, it is really very foolish of him, but he fancied that the child was ill. He always imagines Jack is going to die on the least provocation—so very absurd of him. I told my husband it was probably only the result of over-eating himself that made Jackie feverish—children are so greedy."

"Oh, indeed," was the laconic rejoinder. "Unnatural creature," she said to herself, for she had children of her own, and could not understand the utter lack of maternal love or anxiety betrayed by the beautiful Lady Arnold. However, of course it was nothing to do with her, otherwise she would have liked to give her, Lady Arnold, a piece of her mind.

On entering the ball-room, Rose was soon surrounded by a circle of men, eagerly asking for a dance. She absently granted their several requests, but her eyes were roving restlessly round the crowded room, till at last they found what they sought for in the person of a tall, dark, military-looking man. Their eyes met, and a look of recognition passed between them, but that was all; he made no movement towards her whatever, while she, apparently quite satisfied, was led off in triumph by another man. How exquisitely she danced, her perfect form moving in perfect time to the strains of the band, and her exquisite little feet encased in tiny white shoes with large diamond buckles, glinting in and out from the hem of her white dress in a maddeningly bewitching way. So, at any rate, thought Captain Sir Harry Lander, for of course the tall dark man was none other, as he watched her from the dark recesses of his corner. Presently they halted quite close to him, but they evidently had not noticed his presence. He bent forward, however, and whispered hurriedly:

"In the conservatory, first supper extra."

Lady Arnold started slightly, then with an easy laugh said:

"Oh, it is you, Captain Lander. You really should not hide away in dark corners, and then spring a surprise on one in that way, should he, Mr. Burton?" turning to her partner.

"A thousand pardons. Am I too late to ask for a dance?"

"Very late; but why did you not ask me before? However, let me see," studying her programme with apparent interest. "Yes, you may have the first supper extra, and that is all I have left."

"I suppose I must be content with such small crumbs; let me write my name down," whereupon he wrote his name, and then calmly crossing out the names of the three following and substituting his own, he handed her programme back to her with a significant look. The meaning was apparently not lost upon her, for she made no remark on his decidedly summary disposal of her programme.

How lovely Lady Arnold looks to-night," they said, and some one added :

"Yes, Sir Hubert is not here to-night," and laughed. "By the way, they say he is getting a bit annoyed at the way that fellow Lander follows her about. Old flame of hers, you know, before she married Arnold, who holds the old-fashioned notion that a wife should never look at any man but her own lawful spouse."

"Poor old chap, he made a mistake, then, when he married 'my lady;' she must soon have exploited those ideas, I should think." Whereupon they laughed, and proceeded with equal facility to discuss with vague innuendoes the rest of the company.

"Our dance, I think, Lady Arnold. Will you dance, or would you rather sit it out? The conservatory looks cool and comfortable; shall we go there?"

"Oh yes, by all means." Then, *sotto voce*, "This is what I came for, Harry. I thought this supper extra would never come."

They had reached the conservatory, and Lady Arnold had ensconced herself in a chair of most alluring depths. Captain Lander bent forward and touched her forehead with his lips; she shrank back involuntarily.

"Don't, Harry, don't," she gasped out.

"But, Rose, I don't understand; I thought you had made up your mind, by your coming here to-night. Don't, for heaven's sake, deceive me again, or by heaven I should kill you, I think." And in his eyes there appeared a decidedly dangerous glitter. He was holding her by the wrist, and his fingers clenched themselves so violently that he forced her to cry out for the pain.

"Don't frighten me so, Harry; I am frightened enough as it is. The fact is I *dare* not do this. I know I should repent the moment after, and then it would be too late. No, you must let me go."

"I can't, I won't let you go, Rose. Don't you see what you have become to me? I cannot do without you. But why have you suddenly turned coward in this way? Don't try and persuade me that you have anything like religious or moral scruples, for I should not believe you."

She shrank back and covered her face with her hands. Had she sunk so low as to be even despised by this man himself?

Oh, the shame and the horror of it. If he expressed his contempt now before he had secured her, what would he be like when she was completely in his power? Then, suddenly, the memory of her child at home and the burning kisses he had showered upon her, and his little loving arms wound round her neck, came upon her, and the possibility of love, real pure true love, opened itself before her and she felt, come what might, she would for the future try and become worthy of her little son's love. Then, with this new-born resolution, she turned to her companion and said :

"You are very cruel, but I cannot blame you. I deserve your scorn. I have done you a great injury. I dare not ask your forgiveness. Believe me, you cannot despise me more than I despise myself, but you *must* let me go, and forget me. I cannot do this thing, for my child's sake——"

"Come, this is really amusing. You wish to pose as a devoted mother, but that is all humbug. You know you never cared for the child, so why try and make me believe you do——"

"You will not believe me, I know, but, strange as it may seem to you, I do love my child, and for his sake you must forget me," and, rising from her chair, she made as though she would pass him, but he caught her by the arm and said :

"Very well, go, but remember you have made me what I am by your baseness and trickery. I was a good man once, but when you threw me over to suit your own ends, I think I became a devil, and now, thanks to you, I am what I am. Are you satisfied with your work? You may well shudder, a desperate man is not to be trifled with—go!" and he almost threw her from him. She staggered forward, her face deathly white and quivering with fear, but she turned towards him once more, her hand on the *portière*, and a look of such wistful agony on her face that ought to have touched him.

"Harry, forgive me. Some day I hope you will forgive me for the wrong I did you. I *never* can forgive myself," and here her voice broke in a dry sob; "and God bless you," and drawing aside the *portière* she passed out.

In the hall a servant met her with a note. "Beg pardon, my lady, but I was told to give this note to you at once. It came ten minutes ago, but I could not find you."

Lady Arnold mechanically opened the note and read, "Come at once; Jackie is dying.—HUBERT."

The little scrap of paper slipped from her fingers and fluttered on to the ground. Lady Arnold stood there as if carved in stone, with a look of such intense horror on her face that the servant, forgetting their relative positions, caught her hand and implored her to speak.

"What is it? Can I help you? Tell me."

Slowly she looked round as if she were trying to escape from some one or something, then, in quick, low, terrified accents, she muttered:

"They tell me Jackie is dying. Do you understand me? My boy, my little son, is dying. I must go to him at once—help me—get me a cab, woman—for God's sake be quick!" Then, covering her face with her hands, her whole frame was convulsed by dry, choking sobs.

"It is my punishment. I deserve it, but I cannot bear it. God is just; but, oh my God, be merciful, be merciful!" she wailed.

* * * * *

"Thank God, Rose, you've come at last. Jackie is sinking fast, and keeps on calling for you. You will go to him?"

"Oh, my husband, I am not worthy. Forgive me. Take me to him." And, taking his wife's hand, they went together to the bedside of their dying child. The poor little flushed face lighted up on seeing them, and eagerly stretching out his little hands he said:

"Tiss, mummy. Mummy does love Jackie. Pretty mummy. I sorry I crumpled the flowers, but I won't do it again, mummy dear. Jackie so tired, but I would not go to sleep without saying good night to my angel mummy, pretty mummy. Jack love 'oo so much, and Jackie so happy now God loves Jackie, and daddy loves Jackie, and mummy loves Jackie. Tiss me good-night, mummy, and daddy tiss me too."

The anguished parents were kneeling by his bedside; Rose had buried her head beside the child's, and her tears were falling thick and fast. His little arms were round his mother's neck, and he had laid his cheek against hers.

The stillness was intense. Presently the little hands relaxed their hold, the little lips uttered a scarcely perceptible quivering sigh, and the little white soul had fled to God who gave it.

* * * * *

"Poor Rose, she has been heavily punished, indeed," said Harry Lander to himself, as he read the brief announcement of Jackie's death in the *Times* a few days later; "the vengeance has been taken out of my hands. I forgive her, and may God forgive me."

Other people on reading the notice remarked that it was a mercy he died, as he could never have been anything but a helpless cripple had he lived.

There were only two who knew the full bitterness of his death—his mother, who had learnt to love him, but too late, and his father who idolized him. From this sorrow that each shared with the other, a new and true love sprang up between them, which had its foundation in Jackie's grave, and now there is a no more devoted couple in all London than Sir Hubert and his lovely, but sad-faced, wife, for the link that binds them together is a little white soul in Heaven.

A Buried Sin.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MISSING BANK NOTES.

THE first hour Algernon could snatch from his professional duties he devoted to a visit to Mr. Watson's chambers in Lincoln's Inn, and told him in brief words why he had come, and of his determination, now that he had taken the matter in hand, to sift the mystery to the bottom, being fully convinced of his ultimate success.

The lawyer did not seem to enter very warmly upon the subject, and from his manner Algernon could not tell whether or not he fully believed in the innocence of Sir Harold Thurlowe. He made no admission either one way or the other; he took rather a neutral position, and was not encouraging as to the result of the projected investigation; he seemed disposed to let things rest. What was the use of stirring in the matter after so many years?

"Every use," exclaimed Algernon, inclined to be indignant at his lack of enthusiasm. "The world thinks it worth while to dig up the memory and pick out bit by bit the life of a man who has been dead for a hundred years in order to rehabilitate a tainted reputation. How much more necessary is it to build up

the ruined reputation of the living!—to right a cruel wrong, and clear the name of a good man from unmerited disgrace. It is our bounden duty in the abstract, for the honour of human nature, to do so much: but when the wronged man is a friend, with honourable kith and kindred to lie under the shadow of his evil reputation, to be stabbed by cruel tongues, hurt by venomous whispers, as the world rolls by—he is a cur who will leave a single stone unturned in his search for truth!”

“My dear sir,” exclaimed Mr. Watson with some little emotion, laying his hand on Algernon’s shoulder, “I respect your enthusiasm in this cause. I have been connected with the family for forty years—intimately connected, and know the inner workings on all sides. The honour and happiness of every member of the family is as dear to me as it can possibly be to you—and if I counsel inactivity now, it is that I fear failure.”

“Without risk of failure there could be no success,” exclaimed Algernon impetuously; “but you lawyers are a cold-blooded race—you can’t move without calculating how many inches go to a mile.”

“When you are dealing with the law it is necessary to walk warily,” rejoined Mr. Watson. “You, my young friend, are a trifle hot-headed. You must take care in this matter that you take no step awry, or you may find yourself plunged in quicksands of difficulty when you fancy you are treading firm land. Remember, I am always ready to give you my best advice.”

“You are very kind, Mr. Watson,” replied Algernon; “but I don’t mean to wind any legal red tape about my actions. What I do I shall do on my own responsibility, and I don’t mean to take even so astute a lawyer as yourself into my confidence. My only reason for intruding on you now is to ask if you can give me the numbers of the missing notes which were placed by Harold Thurlowe in Mr. Levison’s hands.”

“Certainly I can, though I don’t see what use they can be to you; they are not in circulation; if they had been they would have been stopped at the Bank of England before this.”

“I have my own views on the subject, and I will trouble you for them nevertheless,” said Algernon, making no further comment.

Mr. Watson rang for his clerk and ordered a certain tin box to be brought to him; then he rummaged carefully among the docu-

ments it contained till he found the one he wanted ; this he had copied, and gave the copy into Algernon's hand, replacing the original in the box.

Algernon had no time to lose ; he left at once and hurried off to Printing House Square. There he sat down and wrote a carefully-worded advertisement, giving the number of each bank note and offering a large reward for the recovery of any one of them. This he left, with the understanding that it was to be inserted on the following day. He rose early in the morning and got several copies of the paper. There was the advertisement in full ; he thought it looked very nice, and felt quite proud of his composition. He sent copies to Mr. Levison and Sir Harold, writing a brief note to the one and a long letter to the other, inclosing one to Claire, to whom all his heart lay open.

He was detained in town the next few days on business ; in any case he would have waited for any possible answers to his advertisement, though in reality he had not expected any. On the Saturday following he went down to Knaresborough as had been previously arranged. Claire met him at the station and the two had a lovely drive together—their very first—and they took the longest road to Knaresborough, so as to show him some of the loveliest bits of scenery in the neighbourhood. She was of course all eagerness to hear what news he had and somewhat disappointed that he had no results to report as yet ; her sanguine anticipations had flown ahead, so that she would hardly have been surprised if he had returned with the missing notes in one pocket and a warrant of arrest for Mr. Levison in the other. She looked half-inclined to cry at learning that the advertisement, on which she had built high hopes, had produced no answers.

Near Knaresborough they met Sir Harold on his steady old bay horse, his late uncle's favourite mount ; he had been going for a ride round to see some of his tenantry, but on meeting Algernon and Claire turned his horse's head and rode back home with them, anxious for the contents of Algernon's budget of news, which was soon emptied ; there was not much food for comment in it ; matters at present seemed at a standstill, and Algernon was not communicative about his plan of future operations.

"Remember, Sir Harold," he said, "you are only a sleeping partner in this concern at present. I am the acting manager—so long at least as you will trust the reins in my hands."

"My dear boy," said his future father-in-law heartily, "do what you think best. I give you a free hand."

"You know," said Algernon, "the cause is *mine—ours*," smiling at Claire, "as well as *yours*."

They went in to luncheon, and presently Algernon observed : "Well, now I think I shall be off to spend a pleasant hour with Mr. Levison."

"Why?" exclaimed Sir Harold. "I thought you had no news."

"What is the use of going if you have nothing to say?" asked Claire.

"Did I ever tell you I had nothing to say?" rejoined Algernon with an aggravating twinkle in his eye.

"No news means nothing to say," she answered. "If you have nothing to tell *us*, you can have nothing to tell him; you *can't* want to talk to Mr. Levison about anything except papa's affair."

"It is quite true that I have nothing special to say," rejoined Algernon, "but I may *manufacture* some important information for the benefit of our mutual friend."

"You might give us the benefit of it too."

"I trust in God you will have the benefit most fully when the time comes," exclaimed Algernon earnestly; "but it isn't wise to pluck at either fruit or fate till they are ripe for the gathering."

"Well, go," said Claire; "but don't stay very long, Algy. And, oh! if you *are* going, as you know I can't go over to Oakwood, and I want to see Ruth—will you give her this letter, please?"

Algernon went through the grounds and crossed over to Oakwood, and encountered Ruth in the garden standing on a short ladder doing gardener's work, cutting and trimming the creeping plants which were straggling untidily over the trellis work.

"I have a letter for you, Miss Levison, from Claire," he said, placing the missive in her hand.

"Dear Claire!" exclaimed Ruth. "You don't know how I miss my dear girls, Mr. Kent; they have been here a whole week, and I have only seen them twice. It seems so sad for us to be so near and yet so far apart."

"The way is clear," replied Algernon. "You know you are always more than welcome at Knaresborough."

"I know," she answered; "but I am between two fires, Mr. Kent, and hurt myself whichever way I turn."

"I understand," he answered significantly; "but you will soon get out of that unpleasant position. I suppose you will soon be going back to town with Mrs. Blaine and Dorothy; they talk of returning home early next week."

"I don't know. I'm not sure I shall go back at all," replied Ruth sadly. "I feel as though my duty—at least, as though there was work cut out for me to do—here."

"All the better for Claire," he rejoined cheerfully; "I am sure *she* needs you just now more than the other branch of the family."

"How is Sir Harold?" exclaimed Ruth suddenly, with a quick inquiring glance into his face. "This coming back after such a long absence must seem—strange to him."

"He has fallen quite naturally into the old lines, and is quite well and hopeful."

"Yes?" she exclaimed interrogatively.

"Yes," echoed Algernon. "I have put my hand to the plough and shall drive it through fields fair or foul, and never stop till I have fathomed the mystery and found the truth I am seeking. Our one object in life, Claire's and mine, is the clearing of his good name."

"I hope, I trust in God you will succeed," she answered, twisting her hands nervously together.

"You believe in him, then?" asked Algernon eagerly.

"From the bottom of my heart," she answered fervently. "I have always believed."

"Good day to you, Mr. Kent," exclaimed Mr. Levison, popping round from an angle of the house. "And what is it, my girl, that you have always believed?" he added, making it evident that he had intentionally or unintentionally overheard her last words.

"In the perfect innocence of Sir Harold Thurlowe, father; in the matter he was cruelly condemned for years ago," she replied steadily.

Mr. Levison's eyes seemed to recede into his head till they became mere black specks, and darted a vicious gleam, like an angry adder, but he answered quite pleasantly:

"You ought to have been his advocate, my dear Ruth; there is no limit to female eloquence; you might have convinced the judge and jury that black was white; but never despair. You may yet lend a helping hand in clearing the good name of this martyred hero." His words were fair enough, but he spoke with

bitter emphasis, and the expression of his face was not pleasant to look on.

"I am sure we have your good wishes, my dear Mr. Levison," said Algernon cordially; "but I fancy we shall get to the root of this mystery without Miss Levison's kind assistance. I may say we are on the track already."

"Indeed?" exclaimed Mr. Levison. "Come in and tell me all about it." Algernon followed him into the library. "Now," he added, pushing a comfortable chair towards Algernon, and taking another for himself, "we can have a nice talk, it doesn't do to let the women know everything; though I believe my Ruth is as prudent as any of them." He was evidently curious as to what Algernon had got to say, though feeling perfectly assured that he had only laid his hand on a mare's nest after all.

"As I told you," said Algernon, "I felt pretty sure of ultimate success, and I think fortune promises to favour me, indeed, has already favoured me, more than I expected."

"Aye, aye!" exclaimed Mr. Levison, hitching his chair a few inches nearer and looking even more interested than before.

"I think I sent you a copy of the advertisement," said Algernon.

"Yes, but of course you have received no answers?"

"But I have, and a very satisfactory answer too," replied Algernon triumphantly.

"That has got to be proved," said Mr. Levison confidently. "Depend upon it, on inquiring, you will find that somebody is playing upon you."

"What would you say if I told you that the note numbered 900124 has been found?" said Algernon emphatically.

"I should say it was a hoax—no man ever advertised for anything that was not answered by some fool or another. You mustn't rely upon any information you get in that way—unless it is well proven."

"What better proof could I have than my own eyes?"

"Do you mean to say you have seen it?" almost shouted Mr. Levison, half springing from his seat.

"If I had not, how should I know it had been found?" said Algernon. "There is one strange feature in the case too—it has only been put in circulation quite lately—and perhaps more curious still, I have already succeeded in tracing it to a highly respectable tradesman in this neighbourhood, at least not many

miles from here." As Algernon spoke with a lively air of perfect conviction, the change that came over Mr. Levison was terrible to see. His face turned to a cadaverous paleness; his lower jaw dropped, his eyes lost all expression and became fixed on Algernon with a dazed vacant stare, and his breath came in short quick gasps—in another moment a purple flush chased the livid look from his face: Algernon thought he was going to have a fit, and was about to summon Ruth, when he leaned forward, laid a hand upon his arm and said in a smothered whisper:

"Have you the note about you?"

"No, indeed; you don't suppose I should carry such a valuable document in my breast coat pocket?" answered Algernon. "It is in very good hands; to-morrow it will be in the possession of the legal authorities. I feel as if I had done with the business, for when the detectives once get to work they will soon make an end of the matter. In a very short time I hope to see the real criminal who has so basely deceived you all, in his right place; for my part, I'd gladly put the rope round his neck, but I'm afraid it's not a hanging matter. Well, I'll go now that I've told you my bit of news. I knew you'd be glad to hear there was a chance of restoring the good name of the family you have served so long and faithfully."

"Yes, of course, delighted," muttered Mr. Levison with a ghastly attempt to smile. He half rose from his chair, but his limbs seemed scarcely able to support him and he sank back, pointing to a side table, as he said:

"This close weather is trying; will you give me a glass of water, please?" This Algernon did. As he left the house he again met Ruth; in fact she seemed to have been waiting for him.

"I don't think your father is very well, Miss Levison," he said; "he seems to be suffering from suppressed excitement."

"What was it you had to tell him?" she asked, laying her hand upon his arm and looking earnestly into his face.

"That my endeavours have been so far successful," he answered; "and that one of the missing notes has been found."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, pressing her hand upon her heart as though seized with a sharp spasm.

"He seems a little strange," continued Algernon; "I think you had better keep a close watch upon him. I shall look in to-morrow morning, and you can tell me how he has been."

For a moment the two stood regarding one another closely; each knew perfectly well what was passing in the mind of the other, then Ruth said, though it evidently gave her bitter pain to speak:

"I am glad the note is found, glad that Sir Harold's name should be cleared at last," tears were now streaming down her cheeks. "But you must work your own way; I cannot spy upon my father. You would not have me do it?"

"No!" he exclaimed, lifting her hand to his lips. "We will trust in God."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS.

ALGERNON returned to Knaresborough House highly satisfied with himself so far, and looking forward to speedy results. He had set the ball rolling and did not mean to let it stop.

He found Sir Harold and Claire pacing up and down in the twilight under the shadow of the elm trees, whence they had a view of Oakwood, and could see him coming long before he could see them; as he came hurrying along whistling cheerfully they went forward to meet him.

"Well?" exclaimed Claire inquiringly.

"Well," re-echoed Algernon. "I hope it *will* be well for us all soon! I hope I shall have a choice morsel of news for you before many days, nay, many hours, are over." He laid a hand on Sir Harold's shoulder, adding, "I have shot an arrow in the dark, but I have hit the bull's eye." Sir Harold fixed a searching look upon his face, but said nothing—he was always chary of words, and at this time was too anxious to utter mere commonplace inquiries—he waited to be told, but Claire impatiently plucked at Algernon's sleeve as though she would shake his information out of him.

"Go on—tell us what you have found out."

"I told him," answered Algernon slowly, "that one of the numbered notes had been found."

"And has it?" she exclaimed eagerly.

He shook his head. "Not exactly."

"Then it isn't true—so what was the use of saying it?" she said—and even her father's face wore a puzzled expression.

"You are no diplomat, my darling," replied Algernon. "Don't you see I have been fishing? I have baited my hook with a fiction, with which I hope to catch a nice fat fact!—I am pretty sure of it too. You should have seen the expression of his face when, with all the assurance I am master of, I gave him this imaginary piece of information. His face changed from cunning confidence to abject terror! He turned livid—his jaws fell—his eyes glazed; I thought he was going to have a fit—for the moment he was startled from his habitual self-control—and I read by these signs that he has, or thinks he has, those notes hidden away somewhere, and my confident assertion, fired full in his face, suggested the possibility of a loss. He said nothing, but he looked everything."

"Still, my dear boy, I fail to see how the matter will work," said Sir Harold, who had listened attentively and taken in the position fully. "As soon as your back was turned he would naturally go and look after his hidden treasure; when he finds the notes are all there intact, your assertion goes for nothing—he will think you have been imposed upon, or that *you* are trying, for some occult reason, to impose on *him*."

"Or most likely," said Claire, with tears of disappointment in her voice, "to save himself from any further anxiety, he may burn or destroy them in some other way."

"He couldn't do it," exclaimed Algernon confidently; "he is too much of a miser to destroy anything that might turn into money a hundred years hence."

"What use would it be to him then?" she observed.

"He might leave it to his heirs or he might clasp it in his cold dead hand and take it to the grave with him," replied Algernon. "But have no fear of his destroying those notes!" he added gravely; "they are the embodiment of a sin! fire would not burn nor waters quench them! I have faith, my dearest Claire, and feel sure that some invisible influence is working for us now, this very minute, turning the wheel of fate till the handle falls into our hands."

"You are so overflowing with faith and energy," said Sir Harold, regarding him affectionately, "I think you would plant the banner of hope even at the frozen North Pole of despair."

"If by any possible means I could have contrived to stay in the house to-night," rejoined Algernon reflectively, "I could

have kept a close watch upon the old fox. Now there's Miss Levison——"

"Even if she were willing, I would not have *her* used in the matter!" exclaimed Sir Harold quickly. "I would rather the shadow of this crime should rest upon my grave than have her clean conscience soiled, even to bring a rightful retribution on her father's head. Poor girl! she suffers and has suffered enough. The fact of her leaving *his* roof, and devoting herself as she has done to my people, my child, tells a story; the knowledge or even suspicion of her father's guilt and its bitter fruit must be torture to her pure soul."

"I agree with papa, and would have Ruth kept clear at any risk. Dear Ruth! She will feel it quite enough if *we* pull out the chestnuts, without burning her fingers in the business."

"That is exactly what I was about to say," replied Algernon. "We can expect neither help nor hindrance from Miss Levison; but I daresay I shall find my brain fertile enough in its resources."

"Even if, as you suspect, he has them secreted, how can you force him to tell their hiding place?"

"I shall find some means of discovering that for myself," he answered; "if the worst comes I shall go to work in a strictly orthodox fashion and get a search warrant."

"I doubt if you could do that under existing circumstances; and if you did I don't see how that would help us; bank notes are such flimsy things—they may be concealed between the leaves of a book or——"

"I'll have every leaf of every book in the house turned over—but it has not come to that yet," replied Algernon. "I am going over to Oakwood to-morrow morning, and shall see how things are. I have thrown the leaven into his mind, and shall see how the work of fermentation is going on."

"Going to Oakwood again to-morrow?" exclaimed Claire, inclined to be vexed. "Well, we don't have much of your company, Algy—and you leave us on Monday morning."

"Perhaps and perhaps not; many things may happen before Monday," replied Algernon.

"You might make Sunday a day of rest. I wanted you to go with me to church at Westover—it is a lovely walk over the hills, and the church is three hundred years old."

"We will go there some other Sunday, dearest; the church

won't run away ; time and opportunity will. We must not think of ourselves at all—everything must drift—everything give place to the matter we have taken in hand. Now or never is our time for action—if we let the present pass, loaded as it is with so many possibilities, the future will never bring it back."

By this time Sir Harold had re-entered the house, and Claire and Algernon continued their promenading up and down, till the twilight faded into night and myriad stars lighted their lamps in the dark blue skies overhead. They took advantage of this opportunity to indulge in a pleasant *tête-à-tête* ; professedly and as a rule under present circumstances they did not talk much about themselves, they were too much absorbed in her father's business ; but somehow as they chanced to be alone they could not help it, and they spent the passing hour as is the way of happy lovers all over the civilized world, and for the time forgot the existence of everything and everybody except themselves.

They strolled away from the regular promenade and went away under the spreading branches of the ancient oaks, the fallen leaves rustling beneath their feet, and presently found themselves in the orchard quite near to Oakwood ; they leaned over a side gate that led out into the bridle-path, and watched the lights appear one after another at the Oakwood windows ; the sitting-rooms on the ground floor did not seem to be occupied at all, for they were left in darkness, while in the upper storey Ruth's room and her father's were lighted up, and though the blinds were down, they could see the shadows of father and daughter passing to and fro—they saw the shadowy frame of the old man sink into a chair near the window ; then Ruth drew up the blind and opened the window as though to give him air ; she fetched him a glass of water and stood opposite to him, her hand resting on the window-sill—unsuspicious of the presence of the lookers-on hidden in the shadows of the orchard. Father and daughter appeared to be talking, for now and then he moved his hand with an impatient gesture—then she kneeled by his side and seemed to say something irritating, for he lifted his hand as though to strike her ; a few moments passed, when he seemed to recover himself, for he got up and crossed the room, though with a somewhat feeble step. Ruth closed the window and drew down the blind ; there was no more to be seen, only an occasional shadow passing to and fro. Presently they parted for

the night, for they saw Ruth's reflection as she moved about in her own room.

"I would give something to spend a few hours in that house to-night," said Algernon, as they turned reluctantly away.

They strolled leisurely on their way homeward through the grounds; the air was so soft and balmy neither of them wished to go in; going in meant gas-light and domestic companionship and they were too well satisfied with one another's company to care for either.

Sir Harold and Algernon sat talking in the library long after the rest of the household had retired to rest—their minds and thoughts engrossed by the one subject which seemed inexhaustible, for the more they talked the more they found to say. It was long past midnight before they separated. When they did so Algernon felt restless, unaccountably so; he could not resign himself to going to bed; quicksilver seemed to be running through his veins; some undefinable mental disturbance was going on within him—his nerves were strained to their utmost tension, and would not be still—and his heart beat like a sledge-hammer. He was not conscious of indulging in any thoughts that could so affect him.

"There is some strong current of electricity in the air," he thought.

He looked from his window; the night was darker than it had been a few hours ago; the stars shone with a feeble light, and were partially obscured by passing clouds. He could not rest in the house; impelled by some irresistible power he went softly down the stairs and out into the grounds. Involuntarily, and without any conscious intention on his own part, he went the very way he and Claire had traversed a few hours ago, and leaned over the gate and stared blankly at the darkened windows of Oakwood, as though by some exertion of strong will-power he could penetrate the walls and see what was going on inside.

His imagination went to work, and in his mind's eye he saw the old man search for and count over his hidden treasures. He did not know how long he had been there; he was oblivious of the flight of time when he fancied he saw a light flickering in the distance. At first he thought it was stationary—then surely it moved, and was moving, through the garden grounds of Oakwood!

It might be some midnight marauder, or it might be anything else ; but he would soon know. He vaulted over the gate and made his way towards it, keeping as much as possible under the shadow of the trees or close to the hedges. The gates of Oakwood were shut ; they were too high and straight for him to climb over ; there was no foothold, and the gate was flanked on either side by a brick wall ; he knew that two dogs were kennelled close by, and as he did not want to rouse their suspicion, he made his way round to the back part of the grounds, and squeezed himself through a narrow gap in the hedge which bounded the kitchen garden ; thence, moving noiselessly and stealthily as a shadow, he found it easy to make his way to where the light was still visible. He moved swiftly, though cautiously, lest the rustle of a leaf, the breaking of a twig, should betray his approach. He felt that some devilry was going on, and determined to find out what. He reached within ten yards of the spot. His heart gave one bound, and then was still—he scarcely dared to breathe. He ensconced himself between two tall trees, the shadow of the one hiding the gap between it and the other. The suspected marauder was Mr. Levison himself.

A lantern was on the ground by his side, and he was just rising from his knees—his face looked haggard, almost livid in the dusky light, but its expression was one of triumphant content, and he gave utterance to sundry low grunts and ejaculations of satisfaction as he stamped upon the ground as though to keep something safely hidden beneath it. He stooped down and arranged the surface of the earth so that it showed no signs of having been disturbed. Then he took up his lantern and slowly made his way back to the house.

Not till he was out of sight did Algernon allow himself to breathe freely ; he had kept his eyes fixed, with almost painful intensity, on the spot which Mr. Levison had just quitted, and as soon as he felt he might do so with safety, he stepped quickly towards it and dropped his handkerchief upon the exact spot where he had seen the old man rising from his knees, and then drew back under the shadow of the trees and waited until the first stream of dawn should give him light enough to begin his intended operations. As he stood there motionless and erect as a statue, watching through the gloom and silence of the night, it

seemed as though it would never end. He scarcely dared to breathe lest he might attract the attention of any belated individual passing the railings close by, when the effect of a stranger being found lurking in the private grounds of Oakwood might bring about unpleasant consequences, and dash down the cup of success from his hand just as he was about to grasp it.

Presently he heard the heavy tramp of the policeman going his rounds; nearer and nearer it came—and stopped short within a few yards of where Algernon was hiding! He seemed to have been told off on special duty to watch the grounds of Oakwood, for he entered them through a narrow swing gate which Algernon had not noticed. He walked leisurely round, lifting his lantern now and then; once he passed so near that the light crept like a long white finger and rested at Algernon's feet. Algernon held his breath. The policeman went back into the lane and continued his beat.

At last, after what seemed an age of waiting, the first streak of dawn appeared, but Algernon thought that the time was almost due for the guardian of the peace to come round again; and he wanted to make his exploration and return to the house without the chance of being seen. Presently tramp, tramp, came the policeman back towards Oakwood; but this time he passed up the lane without entering the grounds, and as soon as the sound of his footsteps died away in the distance, Algernon emerged from his hiding place, looked around, picked up a piece of slate from a rubbish heap hard by, and with that and the help of a clasp knife which he had in his pocket, set to work in a very fever of excitement.

Placed sideways between the gnarled roots of the tree, a few inches below the surface, he came upon a thin tin box, tied up with a piece of twine in a bit of old waterproof! He seized it eagerly, feeling, nay, knowing surely, that it had something to do with what he had most at heart. Without stopping to rearrange the ground, but leaving the hole whence he had taken the box fully exposed, with the earth scattered loosely round, he rushed home! re-entered the house noiselessly, rushed up to his room, shut and locked the door, and sat down with the box on the table before him.

He was in no haste to open it; his dread of disappointment made him hesitate. Although his expectation in this special

direction had only been raised during the last few hours, he felt that disappointment would be terrible to bear! Suppose after all he had only come upon the common hoard of a miser?

At last, with hands trembling from excitement, he broke open the box; luckily the lock was a slight one, and he was able to do this easily. Within it lay a roll of crisp bank notes; he spread them out one by one—for the moment his sight was too dazed to read their numbers! The figures danced before his eyes. He quickly recovered from that momentary nervous excitement. Yes! there they were! the numbers corresponded with those of the missing notes!

With almost irrepressible impatience he waited till the family were assembled in the breakfast-room—they should all have the good news at the same moment. As he entered at the door his step was so elastic, his face so radiant, that all exclaimed at once—Claire started up with clasped hands.

"What is it, Algy? Something has happened! You have brought news—good news at last!"

All eyes were fixed upon him with breathless attention as he told them in brief the events of the night, and almost with a shout of triumph he flung the box upon the table. "There are the missing notes—count them every one!" he exclaimed, wringing Sir Harold's hand. "My dear, dear friend, it is all plain sailing for us now—your name is cleared at last! The whole world will ring with the infamy of this false friend, hypocrite and traitor!"

Mrs. Blaine and Dolly overwhelmed brother and uncle with delighted congratulations; but in a passion of hysterical laughter and tears Claire flung herself upon his breast, and uttered never a word—her emotion overpowered her speech. He who was most concerned seemed, outwardly at least, the calmest of all. He held his daughter in a close loving clasp as he grasped Algernon's hand, and controlled his voice enough to say in broken words:

"You have saved more than my life!"

Then the strength of the strong man broke down; his head sank; his broad chest heaved, and something like a sob seemed choking him. Quietly the rest stole out of the room, and left the father and daughter alone in the sacredness of the joy that had come at last.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ROBBED AND THE ROBBER.

THE day being Sunday, of course nothing in the shape of business could be done, but Sir Harold decided to go to town the next morning for the purpose of consulting Mr. Watson, intending to leave the development of the matter in his hands. The law could do nothing now to atone for its blunder in condemning an innocent man—could not even have the satisfaction of forgiving its victim, who had already paid the full penalty and gone through all the torture that could afflict the guiltiest. In this case, however, the martyr of a mistake had suffered less from any blunder of the law than from the perjury of a traitor, whose villainous scheme to procure the miscarriage of justice had been too successful. His victim had been plunged in the lowest depths, dragged through the grimiest waters, and, but for the devoted faith of a loving daughter, might have gone to his grave and left a black blot upon the record of an honourable family.

Neither law nor justice could undo the cruel past, but at least it could give him back his good name, purified by the fires of adversity. In the midst of the general family rejoicing, they yet could not help feeling deeply concerned for Ruth, on whose sensitive nature they feared the discovery of her father's crime would fall with crushing effect. He who had suffered most from the father's sin felt most for the daughter's sorrow; for in his mind the two stood at opposite ends of the pole, utterly distinct one from the other; no touch of the father's sin could taint the daughter's purity.

"I would do a great deal for Ruth's sake," said Sir Harold thoughtfully, "anything short of—but this matter cannot be hushed up," he added quickly; "once opened, it must be laid bare to the backbone."

"No doubt about that," rejoined Algernon; "truth and justice, so far as we can get at them, are the chief things to be considered, and I am sure that Miss Levison is the last person in the world who would spare herself at the expense of either."

The ladies were at church, and Sir Harold and Algernon were conversing together in the library, whence, looking through the grounds they had a view of Oakwood. Sir Harold turned his eyes

in that direction and saw Ruth, with only a handkerchief thrown over her head, hastening across the lawn towards Knaresborough.

"Here is Ruth—poor, poor girl!" he exclaimed. "See her, will you, Algernon? Tell her—but deal gently with her—though she can have no respect for the man, remember he is her father."

Algernon nodded and went out, stepping through the window on his way to meet Ruth, who hurried towards him with outstretched hands.

"Oh, Mr. Kent!" she exclaimed in breathless agitation, "will you come over to my father? He is in a dreadful state of excitement, raving that he has been robbed, and calling for you! He—he does sometimes have strange delusions."

"This time he has no delusion," answered Algernon gravely. "My dear Miss Levison, he has been robbed, and *I* am the thief—an honourable thief, I think you will say when I tell you that I found the MISSING NOTES!—that you know—that all the world knows of—in your father's possession, and I have relieved him of them! To-morrow they will be placed in the hands of the proper authorities, who will take immediate steps to see justice, though tardy justice, done to Sir Harold Thurlowe, who has so cruelly expiated another's crime; but *we* need not discuss the subject, which will be fully and fairly dealt with elsewhere. Will you go into the house and speak to Sir Harold?"

"No, no!" she answered, shrinking with a stricken air. "I could not—I dare not—now. Come, will you?" She turned towards Oakwood, he following, when Sir Harold stepped out from the library window and called to Ruth. Algernon went on; Ruth stopped and stood as though rooted to the spot. As Sir Harold drew near, she bent her head and buried her face in her hands. He came to her side and took her two hands in his own and drew them gently down; he saw that her face was as white as stone, her eyes dim with unshed tears.

"My poor girl," he said earnestly, "I am sorry that this discovery, that has brought joy and content to *me* and *mine*, must be fraught with so much pain and trouble to *you*. I am afraid you have been taken terribly by surprise."

"No," she answered with quivering lips, and her words laboured brokenly from her, as though she was forced, yet could not bear to speak, "no, not by surprise; for years I have felt that a day like this *must* come——"

"What? Have you known?" he exclaimed with a scrutinizing look upon her face.

"No, I have *never* known," she answered, "but I have always suspected there *must be* something wrong. I knew *you* could not be guilty, and there was only one other on whom the charge could rest. It was for that reason I left my father's house. I could no longer live at home with this terrible secret of my suspicion between us. He knew I suspected him, and accordingly *he* hated *me*. I have always longed to tell you this," she added with deep emotion. "You have not suffered alone for all these years. The knowledge that my own father had brought ruin and disgrace upon one I—honoured and respected, has been a bitter burden for me to bear. It killed my youth while I was yet a girl. If I had not been a strong woman," she added bitterly, "I should have *died* of it!"

"I understand you, Ruth—I understand it all," he said. "I know that *you* believed in me always, even when my nearest, my own mother, condemned me; and the thought of you, your faith and sympathy, has been a comfort and a blessing to me; now I have come home and brought you only pain."

"No!" she exclaimed, lifting her eyes in frank truthfulness to his. "The pain is less than the joy. I am *glad* of this discovery—glad that you will be cleared at last; I would not have had it otherwise! The sins of the father are visited on the children; what I have to bear I will try to bear bravely, and while *you* do not hold me responsible for your wrongs, or in any way connect me with my father's sin, it will not crush me quite. I have been a long time preparing for this blow."

"It shall fall on *you* no heavier than I can help. God knows I would shield you wholly if I could," he answered earnestly.

"I have always believed those notes must be in my father's possession; but how Mr. Kent found them, and where, is a mystery to me. I suppose I shall hear all by-and-by," she added wearily. "My father is incoherent; I can make nothing of what he says." She paused a moment, then added: "I know he has had no mercy on you; I know he is guilty and has little right to expect leniency from you; but he is an old man, and my father. Oh, Sir Harold, deal with him, out of pity for me, as mercifully as you can, while doing justice to yourself!"

"I am afraid but little power will remain in my hands," he

answered gravely, "but what I can do for your sake, Ruth, I will. We all feel with and for you; our positions are unfortunate—but remember one thing: I am deeply in debt for your life-long loving care of my darling child; Claire is your sister, and while I live I shall be always your devoted friend! I wish you quite to understand that."

Their eyes met in one long earnest look, and Ruth did understand. He had held her hand all the time he had been speaking; he let it go now. The ladies by this time were returning from church, leisurely crossing the lawn, but on seeing Ruth talking to Sir Harold, quickened their steps.

"Make my excuses, please," she exclaimed agitatedly to Sir Harold. "I cannot—cannot—see them just now. I must hurry back. I have stayed too long already."

She turned quickly and retraced her steps to her father's house.

"Poor dear Ruth," exclaimed Mrs. Blaine hurrying up. "I'm afraid she's dreadfully cut up—for I suppose you have been telling her, Harold?"

"No, she knew," he answered, "and, of course, you couldn't expect her to be jubilant. Yet she is not sorry—Ruth is too noble to be sorry—that truth should be known and justice done."

"Poor darling," exclaimed Claire; "we must do all we can, papa, and love her more and better than ever." Her father rewarded her with an approving smile.

"Of course," rejoined Mrs. Blaine, "this will make no change whatever in her relations with us."

"I should think not indeed!" exclaimed Claire, indignant at the suggestion of the bare possibility.

"Exactly, my dear Claire," rejoined Mrs. Blaine, "that is what I say, but with some people it would make a very great difference."

"How could you make any difference with Ruth? When our positions were reversed, you made no difference with *me*!"

"You were my own flesh and blood," began Mrs. Blaine.

"And Ruth is more than our own flesh and blood," said Claire, clasping her father's hand tightly. "She clung to *me*, and believed in *him* when his own flesh and blood fell away!"

"Let bygones be bygones, my Claire," whispered her father. Mrs. Blaine flushed crimson at the implied reproach.

"I was going to say, when you interrupted me, I must say very

rudely, Claire—yes, Harold, I must scold her sometimes—you can't expect me to give up my privileges all at once——"

"I don't care how much you scold me, auntie," said Claire, recovering her good temper in a moment; "but I won't have the ghost of an insinuation about Ruth."

"I am not an insinuating person!" exclaimed Mrs. Blaine. "I was going to say—though it seems as if I was never to get to the end of my saying—that now, as things have turned out, I hope Ruth will find no difficulty in returning home with us on Wednesday. She seemed a little doubtful about it yesterday."

"I think it will be a little more doubtful to-day, auntie," said Claire. "She is not the sort of person to desert the vessel in a storm, however leaky and rotten it may be; whatever she thinks it right to do, she'll do, depend on that."

"Yes," rejoined Sir Harold, "without considering whether it is to her advantage or not; for my part I think she ought, as I have no doubt she will, to stay here and see the old man through—bad as he is, and he could not well be worse, she owes him a daughter's duty, if not a daughter's affection."

"Ugh! the wretch! I hope I shall never see his ugly face again—whatever happens he can never be punished enough."

Meanwhile Algernon had gone, according to Ruth's desire, over to Oakwood, and found Mr. Levison in a state of wild excitement, though his agitated manner and his looks said more than his words, for as Algernon entered, calm and grave, he seemed to force himself to control them. His eyes had a cunning twinkle; his face expanded to a ghastly grin, as with ill-concealed agitation, he said, "I have been robbed, Mr. Kent; some villain has spied upon me and robbed me in the night—I sent for you, for I thought *you* might help me find the thief."

"You will not have far to look for him," exclaimed Algernon. "I am the man! There is no need for many words between us, Mr. Levison—you will soon have an opportunity of representing your loss in a public court of justice—the missing notes we know of, which you have kept hidden for all these years, are now in *my* possession!"

The old man uttered no expression of surprise, but stole softly to Algernon's side, laid a claw-like hand upon his shoulder, saying in a half whisper, "Have you got them here? are they about you now?"

Algernon shook him off as though he had been some noxious reptile.

"No," he answered, "they are too valuable to run the risk of loss; for the present they are in safe keeping. To-morrow they will be in the hands of Sir Harold's solicitor, who will decide what further steps to take that justice may not again be defrauded of its due."

"The notes will pass from *your* hands back to *mine*—you will not hand them over to any man's solicitor, and I will show you good cause why," said Mr. Levison, with malicious calm. "See here, Mr. Kent, I am a rich man—though nobody knows—and I can make it worth your while."

"Make what worth my while?" said Algernon, curious to see what position the old man was about to take.

"What is Sir Harold to you," Levison continued, "that you should sacrifice *me* for *him*? If you knew the wrongs I suffered at his hands——"

"Imaginary, I'll go bail," threw in Algernon.

"No, real; he stole the woman I loved, was fast turning my employer's heart against me, turning his trust into suspicion, would have sent me adrift—after my long service in the family, would have sent me adrift upon the world. Worse still, he won the affection of my only child and jilted her."

"In plain words," said Algernon sternly, "he was preferred before you—and exposed some of your petty impositions to his uncle—and all the time you hated him, while pretending to be his friend."

"I did—I did," he answered exultingly; "I turned the tables on him finely. But that's all past; we must look to the future. You see I had my provocations."

"*We!* Please do not connect me with your plans," said Algernon quickly. "As for the last provocation you spoke of—the winning your daughter's affection and jilting her—I believe it to be a lie!" As the last word left his lips he became aware that Ruth had entered the room and was standing silent upon the threshold.

"I heard what you said," she exclaimed. "Who has been jilted, and who has told a lie?"

"Go away, Ruth; go away, my child," said the old man quickly; "it is nothing. Mr. Kent and I are having a little pleasant conversation, that's all, that's all."

She took no notice, did not even look at him, but kept her eyes fixed on Algernon's face, and repeated her question. He did not speak; a guilty confused look came into his face; he was ashamed of having been overheard. He would not wound her ears by repeating her father's words. With heightened colour, she added, still addressing Algernon:

"Was my father alluding to *me* and Sir Harold Thurlowe? I heard you say it was a lie, and you are right. Father, for shame! How can you humiliate me, and slander him, by such a base insinuation? *I* jilted, and *he* the jilter! For shame! for shame! Mr. Kent, as you have said, it is a lie. I was but a school girl at the time to which he alludes. Sir Harold was ever a kind, true friend to me, but never by word or look did he try to win from me more than the sisterly friendship any girl may frankly, innocently give to any true-hearted man. Mr. Kent, I rely upon you as a gentleman to forget my father's false words—the slur he has cast upon us both. There is wrong enough to be answered without adding social slander to the rest."

"Miss Levison, you may rest assured I shall never remember, nor never repeat, even to myself, what I have heard; it will be blotted from my memory as though it had never been uttered," replied Algernon; and she knew he would keep his word.

Mr. Levison had been looking on in speechless rage; he now burst out:

"You are a rare specimen of the Christian family circle! You have been well trained to fly in the face of your own father! You can go, for you have only come to spy, perhaps sell me to your friends over there."

"God forgive you for such an evil thought." She turned, as though to go, when Algernon said:

"Stay, if you please, Miss Levison. I had rather you would stay and hear all that passes between your father and me; there are no secrets between us."

"Aye, but there are," exclaimed Mr. Levison, nodding his head exultantly and cunningly. "Stay, then, my most dutiful daughter. I suppose you know he is the thief who has robbed me? He has been meddling, and found—— Does she know what you have found?"

"She knows what in a few days, perhaps in a few hours, all

the world will know," said Algernon ; " but we need not enter further into that ; the matter has passed out of our hands."

" This is your Sabbath day," said the old man ; " nothing can have been done. The matter has *not* passed out of your hands ; and when I have told you what I have got to tell, if you are a wise man, it will not. It can do you no harm to burn those troublesome notes. I will make it worth your while in more ways than one."

" Oh ! father, father !" exclaimed Ruth, with a look of horror and anguish, " no more—no more ! Even at this, the eleventh hour, be brave ; make a clean breast at last and repent. Why try to make fresh complications involving others, and——"

" Aye, aye," he exclaimed angrily, " you would not care if you saw me in the dock, a victim to the vindictive revenge of my old enemy. But what have I ever done to *you*," he added, flashing a furious glance on Algernon, " that you should join against me ? I never did *you* any harm."

" Personally I have nothing to do with you," he answered. " I am working in my friend's behalf, and for the sake of justice."

" Bah ! What do you, what does any man, care for justice in the abstract if it does not touch himself ? No doubt you will be paid for your labour—you will have your price unless I outbid. Come, let us make a compact. You keep my secret ; I'll keep yours."

" I would as soon make a compact with the devil," exclaimed Algernon roughly. " I will have nothing to do with your infamous secrets, and, thank God, I have none of my own. I came at your request, Miss Levison, though my presence does not seem to be much needed. If you have no further commands for me I'll go."

Mr. Levison clutched him by the arm and drew him to the other end of the room, saying in a half-whisper :

" True, you *have* no secret. I have kept it close ; but you shall have one *now* !"

(*To be continued.*)